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ALEXANDER GONČHAR

STANDARD-BEARERS

A NOVEL



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
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PART ONE
THE ALPS

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I

IT WAS several days since the forward troops had pushed across the frontier and disappeared behind the hills of that alien land. At the river crossing, frontier-guards were examining the papers of squads and individual men on their way to catch up with their units. They had put up the striped frontier-post again and were now erecting the sentry box. The frontier! We had come back to it, and the sentry had taken up his station at the very spot where he had stood on June 22, 1941. We had forgotten nothing; there was much that we had learnt. We were alive, maturer now, and the wiser for what we had been through. Were you alive, though, enemy airman with the Iron Cross on your chest—you who on that black Sunday long before dropped the first bomb on this sentry box? Did you think then that the hour of your doom would be striking soon, that men of the new, battle-born Second Ukrainian Front would be back in their deathless khaki beside this river—nay, that they would be crossing it? “It’s destiny!” you would have said. Ay! the destiny of just armies is ever glorious.

When Junior Lieutenant Chernysh was nearing the post, his attention was caught by a big-boned, broad-shouldered sergeant talking to one of the frontier-guards. The sergeant's close-cropped tawny head kept thrusting forward, and his arms were crooked in the elbow, as if he were creeping stealthily to pounce on a quail in the grass. As far as Chernysh could make out, this redheaded sergeant had been stationed in 1941 right here, at the frontier. Now he was giving a humorous exhibition of how they had first been bombed, how he had sought cover in the willow bushes, how no hole had seemed deep enough and he had burrowed into the ground, while the plane had kept after him like a hawk after a field mouse. He arched his broad greasy back tiger-fashion, remembering how the chills had run down it then. Some days those had been! . . .

Studying Chernysh's papers, the frontier-guard repeated the number of his unit. The sergeant broke off his story and turned to the lieutenant:

"You're bound for the Nth, Comrade Lieutenant?"

"I am."

"Then we'll be travelling together. *Bună ziua.*" *

You couldn't tell by the sergeant's face if he was fooling or serious. He wore the kind of mock-ingenuous expression from which you can expect all manner of surprises. The men grinned in advance as they looked at him.

"Only if you don't mind my saying so, Comrade Lieutenant, I don't seem to remember you."

"This . . . is the first time I'm going up."

"Oh!" The sergeant pushed out his lips, as if much surprised by the fact. "First time! Then maybe you'll fall back five paces so I can salute you in proper style!"

Chernysh reddened with annoyance.

* The Rumanian for "Good day."

"Comrade Sergeant!" (The sergeant clicked his heels with exaggerated precision.) "What are you playing the good soldier Schweik for? Why are you so unkempt?"

The sergeant hadn't tucked in his undershirt properly, and it stuck out beneath his short blouse. It was grimy, and that seemed to disconcert him for a moment. But he wasn't dismayed and showed no signs of blushing. For that matter, it was hard to imagine that he could blush at all. His face remained an earthy grey even after he had wiped off the dust.

"Don't get a down on my shirt for not being as clean as it might be," he said, tucking it in, and his eyelids twitched nervously. "It wasn't my mother that washed it, you see, it was the girls in the front-line laundries, and their hands have long been raw from the soap.... Poor old shirt! Never mind, I'll be washing you myself soon, and in the Danube too!... Now the lieutenant's rig-out is another matter. All nice and new and spick-and-span.... You're from across the Volga, I take it.... Come to the Ukraine by rail?"

"All right, I did. What about it?"

"Well... I made the trip crawling on my belly," the sergeant said, his voice down to nearly a whisper, and so simply that Chernysh was sorry he'd lost his temper.

"So you're really from the Nth?" he queried, anxious to make amends.

"You bet I am!"

"Well... suppose we push off together?"

"Sure thing. My name's Kazakov."

With a final salute to the frontier-guards, they set off across the makeshift bridge that thousands of feet had tramped over in the past few days.

"Here's hoping you'll get to Berlin!" the guards called after them.

"We'll send you a wire when we arrive," Kazakov returned with a straight face.

The pine boards creaked under their feet, the sun paled, as though it were going to rain. The river murmured, covered with beads of silvery foam—its muddy waves were rolling down from the mountains to the distant, unknown sea. Ahead, a purple cloud was floating towards them across the mountaintops; the road beyond the river climbed up and up, and it seemed as if this weren't a cloud before them, but another mountain, and they could reach it too.

Kazakov's boots weren't the regulation kind—they were spoils of war, and with their wide, low uppers they made him look like some bow-legged cavalryman. He walked in a queer, padding way, his whole body leaning forward. As they went, he told Chernysh how he had cut loose from hospital. They'd been giving him electric treatments there for his nerves, to stop his eyelids twitching and his hands shaking when he got excited. But when he discovered that his outfit was already over the frontier, it was too much, and he lit out.

"It just draws you, like liquor does a drinker," he said. "I suppose I'm no use for 'civvy street' any more. Stay a soldier the rest of my life, most likely."

"The soldier for life!" Chernysh grinned. "There used to be students for life once upon a time. . . . And how did you know about me? . . ."

"That you're just out of training school, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I've just got the scout's eye."

On the hilltop above the road, a white pillar loomed. Climbing higher, they saw it wasn't a pillar really, but a tall, whitewashed stone cross, under a little wooden shelter that time had blackened and warped. The figure on the cross had turned dark too, and cracked from the sun and wind.

"There's our 'L'," Kazakov said. A big letter "L," with an arrow pointing westward, had been drawn in

charcoal just under the crucifix. "That means we're on the right track."

Westward! As though struck by the same idea, both turned their heads and looked down—at the crossing, at the river that had once again become the boundary. Beyond it lay their native land, wrapped in the hazy mist of spring. Surely, if not for that trembling bluish haze the whole country would unfold before their eyes: drying fields disfigured with trenches, scorched villages, blasted towns, roads littered with the twisted metal of charred tanks.... Ravaged homeland, bloody cockpit, field of battle—dearer still out here to your sons! Kazakov's face grew solemn, the flippant expression disappeared.

"You should have seen us a year ago... when we first entered the Ukraine.... Spring it was, just around dawn.... Hungry, fagged out, up to our knees in mud.... Think of it: for two years we hadn't set foot in the Ukraine, for two years we'd only heard it groaning, seen from a long way off how it burned. And here was the Kursk country coming to an end, and once past that state farm, the Ukraine started, we knew. We hadn't slept for several nights before that, but here there was no holding us! How we rushed that farmhouse and swept across the field beyond! Our Komsomol organizer, Yaroslavtsev, he takes a look at the map, and 'This,' he calls out, 'this is already the Ukraine!' And the whole lot of us—Siberians and Tajiks and Byelorussians and Ukrainians—we went down on the ground and kissed it. Couldn't help crying, would you believe it!... Stood there on our knees in that unploughed field, coats all covered with mud, with our caps off...."

They hadn't noticed a shadow settling; the rough ground looked darker now and seemed to be rocking gently, like a ship's deck. For the first time they sensed and were consciously aware that this was alien soil.

Rain pattered down, and the falling drops sent up puffs of brown dust, as if they were dum-dum bullets.

"Where's your coat, Sergeant?" Chernysh asked, pulling off his own.

"Oh, I'll get me one," Kazakov replied vaguely. "Let's stop under this mushroom till it blows over," he said, moving up to the crucifix. "The saint won't mind, will he?"

"That's the Saviour.... Get in under my coat."

Both of them got in under it.

The rain beat down harder and harder—and on the plain below, that last bit of their home country, the sun was shining still. The white nimbus hadn't got there yet, and their native green steppes were smiling a last sunny smile at them where they stood on this alien hill. And both Chernysh, the youthful subaltern in his smart new accoutrements, and the tough sergeant stooping beside him so as not to pull off the lieutenant's coat—both of them devoured that sunlit distance with their eyes, as if they wanted to drink it into their hearts and take it away with them.

II

"What part of the country d'you come from?" Chernysh asked.

"Donbas."

"Your people been writing?"

"Got no people. Never had any."

"An orphan, are you?"

"Some orphan! Kids are orphans. And I'm—well, let's see, how old am I? Age-class of 1920.... Yes.... 1920."

The rain ceased as suddenly as it had begun. The last drops were rolling down the naked body on the crucifix; the rain had washed it clean of the dust.

They came out from their shelter and Kazakov started rolling a cigarette.

"Well, their gods are just the same as ours," he remarked, with a sidelong glance at the white cross. "What did they crucify him for?"

"Oh, it's a whole story," Chernysh replied, but he didn't stop to tell it. "So . . . it's on to the West, is it?"

"Absolutely."

They started off. The sodden clay stuck to their boots; walking was a hard job now.

"It's heavy ground," Kazakov said, scowling. "It was easier over there."

"Yes, it was easier."

And they looked round once more. Chernysh's eyes lit up and seemed deeper, and his face looked as if he were standing on parade while the colours were carried past.

"Dear motherland!" The words broke from him involuntarily, youthfully clear and solemn. And even to Kazakov, who couldn't stand any sort of high-sounding talk, they rang genuine and sincere.

"Expect us home," he said. "We'll come back when we've won the war . . . or we won't come back at all!"

They started descending, and the hill blocked out that last view of home. Strange fields stretched by the roadside, broken up into long narrow strips.

"It's queer even to see these little patches," said Kazakov. "Hard to believe that our land used to look like that."

Chernysh gazed silently at the tiny plots, as though reading a book of abysmal penury.

"This wasn't the way I pictured Europe," Kazakov confessed. "I thought it was all cities and gardens, one on top of another—that you couldn't walk a step without running into somebody, it was so overcrowded. They're forever wanting more living space, aren't they? And here it turns out their villages are even farther apart than ours are in the Donbas."

The rain-washed crops were a vivid green. Myriads of pliant stalks flanked the roadside ditch. The sky cleared again; but all the way to the first village they didn't meet a soul. There were only the stone crosses gleaming white above the road; and the markers charcoaled upon them pointed westward.

The walls in the village main street were covered with inscriptions testifying that a big and lively army had lately passed that way. They still echoed its laugh. "Vasya and Kolya, catch up!" "Be seeing you in Bucharest—Balabukha and the Bull"—though hundreds of miles of enemy territory still lay between here and Bucharest. "Vladimirov, step on it!" And so on.

And over it all the "L"... the "L"—and a big arrow pointing to the West.

A tambourine spoke up suddenly in the middle of the village, a fiddle squeaked. A group of soldiers stood in a semicircle in front of a brown peasant house. An old Gypsy sat on the doorstep, the fiddle pressed against his beard, and with him was a big-eyed lad with a tambourine. Before them, some boys and girls were dancing, kicking up the mud. Their curly pates tousled and homespun shirts hitched up high, they turned frequent cartwheels, at which everyone roared with laughter. The old man cried out encouragement. At the sight of Chernysh, with his officer's insignia, he jumped to his feet, bent over double and started playing "Katyusha." Chernysh felt ashamed for the old man's cringing and the children's pitiful capers.

"Come on," he said.

But Kazakov was keen to stay.

"This must be some of their West-European culture," he said. "Let's have a look at it."

"You'll have plenty of chances yet," Chernysh insisted.

Beyond the village they met Rumanians and Bes-

sarabians transporting our wounded in their ox-drawn carts. The oxen had worn their feet sore on the stony road and were limping, but the Rumanians in their grey jackets and tall black caps walked stolidly beside the carts, like the salt-carriers of old. Some fed the beasts out of their hands as they went. Gaunt, haggard and swarthy from constant exposure, with prominent melancholy eyes, these men made one think of the crucifixes—they might have stepped down from the white roadside crosses.

Once in a while, on one of the carts, a head would be raised heavily under a bloodstained coat.

"Brother! . . . Say, brother. . . . Give us a smoke."

Kazakov doled out the remains of his tobacco. For the first time Chernysh regretted that he didn't smoke.

"How far's the front?" Kazakov tried to find out.

"Oh . . . a long way. . . ."

"Well, what's the distance?"

"We've been moving . . . two days now"

The carts creaked, muffled groans came from the wounded, and Chernysh gazed at them with a kind of awe. They had been where he hadn't and seemed to him a different race of men. It made him feel guilty to be walking past them, hale and hearty, with the hot young blood glowing in his face. He pictured how, before long, he too might be lying on a cart with his coat flung over him, wincing every time the wooden wheels bumped against a stone.

They stopped overnight with a taciturn Rumanian, in a house full of children and chickens. The woman of the house served some goat's cheese for supper, dumped a hot round of *mamaliga** on the table and sliced it with a thread. Her husband, in rawhide sandals and narrow woollen trousers, sat silent on the bed, sucking at his

* Rumanian maize-pudding.

empty pipe. In the corners, the swarthy, grimy children goggled at the visitors. Apparently, they were surprised that these strange men, of whom the schoolbooks said that they would kill everybody, weren't doing any killing, but laughing and eating *mamaliga*. The woman threw the children a round of *mamaliga* too, and they fell upon it like so many sparrows on a sunflower. Kazakov looked and looked at the youngsters gulping down the hot lumps, then gave a sudden sigh.

"We've got kiddies like that too.... In the Ukraine last winter—you'd enter a village, and there wouldn't be a soul in it. Everything a wreck. Only some kiddies squatting on the embers, trying to warm up. 'Where's your Pa?' 'Haven't got one.' 'And your Ma?' 'Got no Ma.' Well, you'd pull off your coat, start shovelling. Make a dugout for them, leave 'em some hardtack—and on again to the West."

"After this war," said Chernysh, "this won't happen again. Children won't squat on the cinders of their homes.... People won't cringe like that fiddler did to-day.... After this war, everybody must have a decent human life...."

Kazakov walked over to a scraggy little girl with a cross around her neck. "See what we want, curly?"

"*Nu știu....*"*

He put his heavy, calloused hand upon her head.

"Don't want you to spend your life slicing *mamaliga* with a thread. See?"

"*Nu știu!*" she repeated stubbornly.

"Want you to be free...."

"*Nu știu.... Trăiască România mare!*"** the child brought out suddenly, and her black eyes gleamed with defiance.

* I don't understand.

** Long live the Greater Rumania!

Her father and mother, panic-stricken, bid her hush.

"What did she say?" Chernysh asked.

The man, fidgeting nervously, explained that the schoolbooks said that. The child crouched in the corner, eyes flashing like a wolf-cub's. Chernysh got up and took a turn about the room.

"This war of ours isn't a matter of just another year or two," he said thoughtfully. "Smashing the enemy armies won't be the end of it. We'll have to fight another war, just as bitter, against the chauvinism with which they've poisoned even these little ones."

"*Nu ştiu?*" asked Kazakov. "Going home after we win the war, I'm coming here to eat *mamaliga*. Hear me, wolf-cub? What's your name? Helena? I'm sure, Helena, you'll give me a better welcome then...."

The farmer went out to the sheepcot to sleep: he was afraid his sheep might be stolen. His wife made up the bed for Chernysh, and for Kazakov she arranged a shake-down on the floor—she thought he was the young officer's batman. But Chernysh didn't like the idea of turning people out of their bed, so he stretched out on the straw too. The woman gave them a heavy woollen rug that smelled of sheep's sweat. Kazakov didn't undress, he merely unbuttoned his collar.

"That's a luxury I never deny myself," he said, "not even in a fox hole. Can't sleep properly if I don't open my collar. Now when I've got it open, I feel as if I'd stripped to the skin and was lying on a feather bed at home. First-class!"

The woman put the children to bed, sat down beside them, and dozed all night that way, without snuffing out the light.

Waking up long past midnight, Kazakov saw Chernysh sitting up in his undershirt—he seemed a mere stripling without his uniform. The lieutenant looked about him uneasily.

"What's up?" Kazakov asked, alarmed. "Anything the matter?"

"Fleas," Chernysh muttered helplessly. "Fleas."

Kazakov settled down again.

"That's Europe for you," he grunted, turned over, and went back to sleep.

III

Next day the pointers brought them out onto the highway. It was crowded and noisy; lorries rumbled past endlessly, with guns, ammunition, field kitchens; troops tramped, sweating under their packs.

Kazakov perked up, as if he were nearing home. His medals, on their soiled ribbons, gleamed dully on his chest. He looked about him curiously—took drinks of icy water from the green roadside wells, ladling it up in his cap—then waved the cap at girls from the field bakeries as they drove past.

Chernysh was impatient to see real warfare, but to catch up with it seemed impossible—it kept receding, like a desert mirage, leaving behind only roads swarming with people, who rolled on and on and on, grimy with dust, and it looked as if this human stream would never end. Jokes and laughter sounded around him. Somebody was telling how in Botoshani a whole outfit of ours—straight from the march, with the packs still on their backs—had happened to walk into a brothel, and what a sight of Europe they had got there. Kazakov contrived to be everywhere, he joined in all the conversations that were going, knew all about everything and seemed to be old pals with everybody here. His high spirits gradually communicated themselves to Chernysh, who began to feel as if there were no war at all, no horrors, but only a sort of giant merry-go-round, a tremendous jollification, and they were all in a hurry to get to it.

"It's good to be up front again!" said Kazakov. "The very air is different! Makes a different man of you."

Rumanian shepherds came into the road to beg tobacco. They bent low, pulled off their caps and stretched out thin brown hands.

Chernysh couldn't see them without getting worked up. "What are you bending double for?" he demanded. "Straighten up and come along!"

Carried away, he urged them to join in these fantastic revels. While the shepherds thought he was laughing at their poverty, and backed nervously away. The Germans had taught them to keep at a proper distance when the military talked to them.

The day after, Chernysh and Kazakov were already nearing the village where the regiment had its Headquarters. The field track ran amid tall corn. It showed signs of plentiful traffic, but just now there was nothing moving on it, neither waggons nor motor vehicles.

"They only use it at night," Kazakov remarked, studying the fresh wheel tracks underfoot.

Beyond the village, which appeared before them in a sudden riot of green, rose a twin elevation, like a gigantic camel. This height was held by the enemy. It was quiet, everything around seemed asleep. No signs of life. The bushes silently alert—the hills and luxuriant gardens green and still—the sun motionless over this sea of emerald, radiating a blaze that hurt the eye. Over to the right, some scores, or maybe it was hundreds of kilometres off, the dark-blue Carpathians towered amid dazzling white clouds Not a shot to be heard.

So this was the war, which Chernysh had pictured a roaring, crashing, thundering thing! It greeted him with an unimagined, unnatural stillness, with a sultry noonday drowsiness, with a sinister emptiness of the steppeland roads. The village was quiet too. The yards were overgrown with weeds—the villagers had been

evacuated to the rear. Here and there, soldiers popped in and out of the orchards, gathering up small, bitter cherries from the ground. The cherry trees here were tall and shady, like oaks, and studded with clusters of fruit that gleamed black in the sun.

Outside Headquarters, Kazakov ran into his fellow scouts.

You could tell them right away among the rest by their swaggering gait and by the way they talked and moved, which had a sort of nonchalant carelessness about it. The pets of the whole regiment, they had in time developed this air of breezy assurance. Their unit had long since become "home" to them, and they felt as much at ease in it as they did with their own folks. Pushing, laughing and all talking at once, they informed Kazakov that they were cooling their heels—three days back they'd brought off a particularly tough job of getting a prisoner, and the Old Man had given them a few days' holiday. The end of the matter was that they dragged him off to have a drink. They wanted Chernysh to come too, but he wouldn't, being anxious to reach his final destination the same day.

After getting his orders at Headquarters, and before setting out for his battalion, Chernysh went along to report to the regimental C.O. The Tajik adjutant told him the Old Man was with Major Vorontsov in the next dugout, and advised him to look in there.

Major Vorontsov's dugout, piled with newspapers, maps and printed matter generally, was pleasantly fresh and cool. They probably kept the plank floor sprinkled with cold water to make the temperature stay down. Pacing, or rather all but running up and down the dugout was the Old Man himself—Guards Lieutenant-Colonel Samiyev. This was just the way Chernysh had visualized him from what Kazakov had said. A small, brisk, remarkably active Tajik, he looked Chernysh

over from head to foot and was apparently satisfied with the smart military bearing of this young subaltern, who stood at attention on the threshold with his dusty pack upon his back.

"Chernysh?" Samiyev tapped his forehead suddenly with a brown finger. "Chernysh? ... Where do you come from—what part of the country, I mean?"

Chernysh, flustered, replied in Tajik. Samiyev beamed.

"Your father's a geologist? His name's Vsevolod Yur-yevich?"

"Yes."

"Do you hear that, Vorontsov—he's practically a neighbour of mine! Such a coincidence!"

Samiyev had known the elder Chernysh long before the war—they'd worked together on a geological expedition in the Pamirs. Chernysh had often gone with his father on his trips about Central Asia, and had long been familiar with the spots Samiyev was eager to hear about. The lieutenant-colonel's subordinates would not have known their C.O. at this moment: they thought of him as hard-boiled and as explosive as gunpowder. He offered Chernysh a seat and insisted on his taking it. Walking restlessly back and forth, he threw affectionate glances at the young man, as if here, in this strange land, he had suddenly come face to face with his distant youth.

"I'm very pleased, very pleased indeed, that you're to be in my regiment," he said rapidly—Chernysh could hardly keep up with what he was saying. "Think of it, Vorontsov! My friends already have officer sons. And here we still think of ourselves as young fellows!"

Major Vorontsov was lying on his cot, covered with a sheepskin and some heavy coloured rugs: he had been down with malaria for several days. He did not join in the conversation, merely giving Chernysh an appraising

look from time to time. On the road, Kazakov had told many a tale of Hero of the Soviet Union Vorontsov. A company political instructor at Stalingrad, a hero of the Dnieper crossing, he was now the regimental commander's political assistant, and you couldn't imagine this Guards Rifle Regiment without him. When others took sick, they might go to the hospital. Vorontsov got over his ailments where he was, and it never occurred to him that it could be otherwise. When one of the other officers was ill, he wasn't to be bothered. But to Vorontsov people came even when he was laid up, and talked to him as if it made no difference. Others might have their personal troubles and were entitled in such cases to complain and demand sympathy and help. With Vorontsov everything must always be all right, and it would have been queer to hear him complaining about anything: why, that was Vorontsov! And indeed, he never did complain, while all the rest brought their complaints to him, and this he considered the natural state of affairs. There was a plan one time to send him to study, but he would not go, and somebody else was sent instead. Offered a job at Front Headquarters, he declined, and no one was especially surprised. How could it have been otherwise? Vorontsov was, as it were, a vital and indispensable cog in the complex regimental mechanism. He was to the regiment what the mother is to the family. Mother must comfort everyone, listen to all their troubles, cure their ailments, punish them, guide them, without herself ever breaking down. She is so much a part of things that you take her for granted half the time, and only when she's gone do you realize how much she meant. . . .

Many was the time Vorontsov had gone into action with the infantry when things had been tough, and sometimes when they hadn't been so tough either. The staff officers at Divisional Headquarters were in the habit of addressing him as "Commissar," secretly envying

his courage and prestige. And now Chernysh saw this major, whom he had already set up as a model for himself. True, he hadn't pictured the Hero like this—lying under a sheepskin and rugs, with a lined, sallow face. His mind's eye had seen Vorontsov in a proud, warlike attitude at the head of the infantry, with a revolver in his hand and a newspaper sticking out of his pocket—that was the picture Kazakov had given. Instead, he saw a tired face, not warlike at all, but pensive, and a broad forehead beaded with perspiration. Vorontsov lay there, yellow-skinned and grave, with the sheepskin up to his chin, and his head bald except for a thin light-brown fringe. His deep-sunken grey eyes looked up frequently at Chernysh, studying the regulation cut of his dark hair. Chernysh would have liked to hear him say something, if it was just one word, but Vorontsov did not speak, only moved his parched lips soundlessly from time to time. Samiyev, on the other hand, was talking away, rubbing his small, quick brown hands.

"Don't be too quiet, keep your end up," he told Chernysh, "or they'll be treading on your toes. Of course, it's all new and strange to you here—I know all about that, I've only been out of the Academy a year myself. It's a fact, believe it or not, I'm an Academy graduate! But I'm sure you'll like us. You'll learn fast—people learn faster here than back home, if, of course . . . but I imagine you're no coward?"

"Action will show, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel!" Chernysh replied, colouring.

Vorontsov turned his head abruptly and stared at him from under shaggy brows.

"You a Komsomol?"

"Yes, Comrade Major," Chernysh answered, jumping up.

"Sit down," said Vorontsov, and turned away to the wall.

"Yes, action is the surest test," Samiyev went on. "Of course, courage is a man's most precious quality. Do you go in for sports?"

"Mountain-climbing, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel."

"That's fine! I might have told by your looks, you're so light and wiry. It'll come in handy . . . up in the Alps."

Chernysh was almost too thrilled to speak.

"Are we going to be there too?"

"Where aren't we going to be? We're going to be everywhere, Guards Junior Lieutenant"—Chernysh noticed he said "Guards"—"absolutely everywhere. We're only just beginning to spread our wings!"

"Is there going to be a drive soon, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel?" Chernysh couldn't help asking the question, though he knew he had no business to.

Samiyev and Vorontsov exchanged smiling glances. The smile lit up Vorontsov's face and seemed to transfigure it. He looked so simple and kindly that Chernysh felt as if he had known him for ages, and all his constraint disappeared.

"Impatient, isn't he?" said Samiyev. "Are you ready for one?"

"I'm ready, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel."

"Good. Don't worry: our train will pull out exactly by the GHQ timetable. Right on the dot. Just when it has to. Where are they sending you, did you say? Bryansky's Third Mortar outfit? You couldn't do better. Bryansky is a veteran of the regiment, he fought at Stalingrad. A fine Communist and a man of education; he was a student before the war—in Vitebsk, I think it was. . . ."

"In Minsk," corrected Vorontsov, lowering weary eyelids slowly.

"Yes, yes, that's right, in Minsk. Brilliant fellow. When we're through with this war, I'll make sure he goes

to the Academy. That's where he belongs. What do you think about it, Major?"

"Don't be in such a hurry," Vorontsov replied, without opening his eyes. "The war isn't ending today, is it?" And after a pause, he repeated: "No, it isn't ending yet...."

When Chernysh was about to go, Samiyev thought for a moment, then asked casually:

"By the way, our Chief of Staff needs a third assistant. Would you care to take the job?"

Chernysh flushed. He felt flattered by the offer; but, looking straight at Samiyev, he said:

"I'm much obliged, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel. But I'd rather take a platoon. I feel bad as it is over not having had any direct share so far...."

"Yes, yes, I quite understand," Samiyev interrupted, putting his hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Well, the best of luck when you get into the fighting...."

Vorontsov brought out a hot hand from under his covers and held it out to Chernysh. The sleeve of his undershirt slipped up all the way to the elbow, and he seemed such a comfortable sort of person, he might have been Chernysh's father.

"I'll be seeing you again," he said in a feeble voice. "We've got a long way to go ... a big job ... and very responsible. You're ready, you say?"

"I'm ready for everything."

Outside the dugout, Chernysh stood for a few moments getting his bearings. They'd told him at Headquarters where he'd find the Third Battalion, and he set out now along the railway embankment.

Headquarters was located in a shellproof place just by the railway viaduct, and he had to pass it again on his way. Outside, a dusty signalsman was tying up a white horse. Chernysh had met the man at Divisional

Headquarters, had asked him something or other, and now the soldier saluted him like an old acquaintance.

The Chief of Staff stepped out with a folder in his hand. His eyes went up automatically to the sky, scanning it for raiders. Then he caught sight of the horse. He stared at it in horror and demanded, spluttering:

"Why is that horse white?"

Apparently he meant, why isn't that white horse camouflaged?

"I'm asking you," he shouted, brandishing the folder under the signalsman's nose, "why is that horse white?"

The man jumped to attention and answered slyly:

"I don't know why, Comrade Major. Maybe it was sired by a white stallion...."

Chernysh smiled to himself and went on, without waiting to hear how the conversation would end. A new life was starting, with new interests.

The path along the embankment ran through some tall grass. The warm air was filled with the heady scent of wild flowers and herbs. The fields slumbered in the sweltering noonday heat. Amid the corn stood a wrecked switchman's box with some battered tree trunks around, and from behind it came the stench of corpses.

IV

"Guards Junior Lieutenant Chernysh reporting."

"All right. Put your hand down."

The captain of the mortars laid down his newspaper and buttoned up his collar. His neck was white and delicate, like a girl's; no trace of sunburn, as if he never left this dugout.

"They phoned me you were coming," he went on, and giving Chernysh his hand—white too, and firm—

he introduced himself: "Guards Senior Lieutenant Bryansky."

They sat down on the parapet outside and studied each other closely while exchanging trivial questions. Bryansky had a good-looking face with finely drawn features, pale, but not thin. A pair of keen blue eyes looked out from under long fair lashes.

Twilight was falling, rosy with the sunset's after-glow. Along the embankment a platoon came marching, with shovels, picks and crowbars. Stamping heavily, the men shuffled to a halt in front of Bryansky. A stocky, broad-faced lieutenant reported in a gruff bass that the 1st Platoon was back from work. Bryansky, standing before them with his slender frame and his shock of fair hair, looked like a sunflower in bloom, Chernysh thought. He listened carefully to the report, asked if none of the tools had been left behind, jotted down how much earth they had dug up and finally gave permission to dismiss. He introduced Chernysh to Lieutenant Sagaida, the platoon commander.

"Going to be a platoon johnny too?" Sagaida inquired, eyeing Chernysh without ceremony. "That's fine, I'll have it a bit easier at last. . . ."

"After the war," Bryansky added.

They went to look over the firing positions. These branched out in different directions, with communication trenches between the weapon-pits. In the pits, the mortars stood under camouflage nets, staring up into the clear Rumanian sky. The men, most of them staid, whiskered fellows, jumped to their feet on sighting the officers and waited in motionless expectancy. They belonged to the latest replacements, whom Bryansky had himself picked and trained during the lull in operations. These soldiers, for the greater part *kolkhozniks* from the Vinnitsa, Podolya and Dniester country, were well-disciplined and painstaking. Fellow villagers, neighbours,

and two of them actually brothers, they all kept together, were still filled with their common memories of home and training-camp, and called one another by their given names:

"Khoma!"

"What d'you want?"

"What have you done with that ramrod?"

He might have been asking, "Where did you put the pitchfork?"

It was as if their whole *kolkhoz* had picked itself up and come here, only instead of ploughing or sowing, they had tackled the quadrant and a whole strange new craft, which they mastered fairly soon, however, so that Bryansky was well satisfied with his whiskered pupils.

"I made no mistake when I picked this whiskered lot out of all the replacements," he was saying to his officers now. "They're hard workers and that's just as vital at the front as at any factory in the rear. Incidentally, have you ever thought about what kind of people show the most guts in action?"

"Roughnecks," said Sagaida. "Jailbirds."

"You're quite wrong," Bryansky retorted. "On the contrary, I've known plenty who thought nothing back home of cracking cribs, while out here, in the face of death, they proved miserable cowards. The best soldiers are yesterday's Stakhanovites, miners, fitters, ploughmen and honest working people generally. Before anything else, war means work, the hardest work of any that man knows: without Sundays, without holidays, twenty-four hours a day."

"Comrades," said Sagaida, as though addressing an audience, "you have heard a short lecture by a scientific researcher in the problems of war, Guards Senior Lieutenant Bryansky. Will there be any questions?"

"Keep right on," Bryansky grinned sardonically.

It took Chernysh a long time to get to sleep that night.

The dugout was hot. Next to him, Sagaida was snoring away; his whole body was aglow, and he kept muttering in his sleep and flinging a hot heavy arm across Chernysh. In the other bunk, Bryansky was breathing evenly. The moonlight came in obliquely through the doorway, vanishing each time the sentry passed outside. At the head of Bryansky's bunk, a telephone-operator sat, humming soft little airs, and calling somebody at frequent intervals.

"Calling 'Star,' calling 'Star,' 'Thunder' calling 'Star'...."

And then everything would sink again into a silence so intense that surely the whole world must hear the sentry's cautious footsteps.

Chernysh lay with his eyes wide open, gazing up at the timbers overhead and thinking of his mother, in hot Transcaspia; she was probably worrying about him at this moment, picturing him stopping up a pillbox embrasure with his own body.

"Zhenya," she had told him the last time he saw her, "I know how utterly impulsive you can be. You're too romantic. Of course, I don't want you to be a bad soldier or hide behind other people's backs. I know you couldn't, anyway, and perhaps that's what I love most about you. Be what you are, be brave, fight them, but, Zhenya... think of your mother too sometimes...."

Poor mother! How many unhappy thoughts she must be thinking! And here he was lying in a quiet dugout, and there wasn't any fighting—only the moonlight streaming through the doorway and the sentry's echoing footsteps, and some strange "Star," to which the young telephone-operator gave such frequent assurances that he was there.

And yet Chernysh felt that today he had arrived at something tremendously great, that something immensely important had taken place in his life. From now

on there was a stone wall before him, blocking his way. The roads all came to a dead end and would not lead anywhere until he smashed through that wall himself, so that the barred ways would straighten out, like coiled springs, and run ahead with arrows pointing for others.

"You're awake, Comrade Lieutenant?" asked the telephone-operator.

"What?"

"I'm sick of these girls, I say, they keep calling and calling. . . ."

"What do they want?"

"The senior lieutenant. Not from our outfit either, some kind of a 'Birch,' and then there's a 'Violet'"

"Wake him up, then."

"Mustn't. He said I was to tell the 'Violets' he wasn't there."

V

In the morning Shovkun, Bryansky's middle-aged orderly, brought in a billycan and spoons, spread out a towel and sliced bread on it.

"What have you got there?" Sagaida raised his tousled head to peer into the can. "Peas again! Hullo, old pals, haven't seen you for a long time! . . . Shovkun!"

"Yes, Comrade Lieutenant?"

"I know you and your 'Yes'! Got any vodka?"

"They didn't issue any today."

Sagaida heaved a deep sigh.

"Let me tell you this, Shovkun," he said, "your goodwife Kilina's taken a man into the house. A militiaman."

Sagaida watched to see the impression his words had made. Shovkun blinked like a baby, his eyes moistened, and he seemed to sag and turn limp. He smiled helplessly.

"Oh no, Comrade Lieutenant. . . . That isn't pos-

sible. . . . There aren't any militiamen anywhere near us. They're all over in Gaisin."

Sagaida pondered this.

"Well then, she's making up to the *kolkhoz* team-leader," he said. "He's brought her a waggonload of straw, and she's all smiles and glances for him. 'Come over in the evening, Kharitonych,' she says, 'I'll have some nice dumplings and cream for you, and something to drink too. . . .'"

"Quit it," said Bryansky, frowning with distaste.

The three officers sat down to their meal. Shovkun, standing by the door, didn't seem to be there at all. He had a wonderful knack of seeming to disappear, of doing everything unobtrusively and never being in anybody's way. But let Bryansky call him, if only in his sleep, and Shovkun would call back at once in his quiet voice: "Yes, Comrade Lieutenant?"

Sagaida wolfed down his food. Then he wanted a smoke—but he knew that no one in the battalion had a shred of tobacco.

"You don't smoke?" he asked Chernysh.

"No."

"And don't drink?"

"No."

"And don't what-you-may-call-it either?"

Chernysh blushed, while Sagaida started grouching about Rumania. A miserable country of paupers! Houses without chimneys, because Antonescu imposed a chimney-tax. Mustn't plant tobacco, because that was a government monopoly. . . .

"They've scoured all the roads for our cigarette-stubs—and they talk about 'Europe'! . . ."

Bryansky suffered too without tobacco, but bore up stoically. Shovkun collected the dishes, washed and dried them, and though his motions were unhurried, he got through his work fast enough. Here he already had every-

thing done and stood shifting from foot to foot, glancing over at Bryansky, to whom he was obviously devoted.

"Yes, I'd give a lot for just one pull at a fag!" Bryansky complained at last.

"Comrade Lieutenant," Shovkun responded eagerly. "I've got a little bit. . . . She sent it up in her last letter. . . ."

"Who, your Kilina?" shouted Sagaida. "What are you keeping quiet for, then? Give it here quick!"

They lit up.

"Shovkun," Sagaida called, inhaling greedily. "Do you call this tobacco? It's something foul!"

"I've mixed in some of this knotweed," Shovkun said apologetically. "Our fellows are all smoking it. It's strong. And the Rumanies have a lot of it growing in their fields."

"This is a dog's life," said Sagaida. "I hate this defence business. Dig and dig and dig. Advancing is another matter, now. It's only when we're pushing ahead that I feel I'm really alive. I say, Chernysh!"

"Well?"

"Give me some girl's address—a schoolmistress or a little agronomist or something."

"What do you want it for?" Chernysh asked, surprised.

"I'll write her a letter."

This was a mania with Sagaida. He wrote numbers of them, to anyone and anywhere, for the one purpose of getting the girl's photo. If he gained his point, he went around for several days bragging and showing off this picture of a girl that he'd never seen and never would see. He would say all the nice things he could think of about her; then declare with sudden gloom:

"But that's not her own photo; she's sent somebody else's. the baggage!"

"Why on earth should she?"

"Because she's pock-marked!"

"But you've never seen her!"

"I know she's pock-marked all the same!"

And at such times he was best left alone. He'd shove the picture angrily into his nolecase and say no more.

All this struck Chernysh as clowning.

"I don't understand," he said, "how you can write to a complete stranger."

"Well, what am I to do, according to you?" Sagaida shouted. "You tell me what I'm supposed to do! You're all right—you've got some little Uzbek girl waiting for you, and singing 'Dark Is the Night' as she picks her cotton!"

"Everybody's got someone waiting for them."

"Oh, have they? There's nobody waiting for me!"

"What about your home folks?"

An ugly grimace distorted Sagaida's face. His lips quivered.

"My home, brother . . . there's nothing left of my home. . . ."

And he told his story, long familiar in the regiment.

"I suppose you don't know, our division bears the name of my home town? Sure, that's my home place, I had the luck to be in myself on freeing it. Nearly a year ago that was, wasn't it, Bryansky?"

"Just a year in a month's time."

"The fighting started at nightfall," Sagaida began, "and by midnight we were entering the town, with the Fritzes beating it across the Dnieper. Well, in we come, and everything's blazing, crackling, caving in. . . . I got Bryansky here to let me off. . . . It would have been better, Yuri, if you hadn't! There I am in the old town, not many soldiers about and no civilians at all, and the street one big blaze. . . . I know it and yet I don't, it's a street I've known all my life, and then again it's all different and horrible. I've never seen such a flaming night! . . . I turn in at the factory—the walls are a wreck, girders all twisted and hanging down, and underneath

them a lot of bombs are dangling, like so many black pigs. The Fritzes didn't get a chance to set them off.... In the park, the open-air theatre is just about burning out, every tree is lit up, you can see every little leaf. And I used to sit there once upon a time, and cuddle a girl.... Then I get to our end of town, and in the place where our house stood, there's just a pile of rubble and cinders, that's all the home there was left for me, brother! I prowled and prowled, and finally I located some neighbours of ours, down in a cellar—they didn't recognize me, though, they were so stunned. Took me a long time to convince them that I really was young Vladimir Sagaida, the same that had been the terror of all the neighbourhood. 'How you've changed! You've grown so manly!'—what they meant was, 'How much you've aged!' 'Where are my folks?' I ask. And they tell me my old man pushed off into the country with a wheelbarrow, back in the winter of 1941, trying to get hold of some food, and must have died out there somewhere, or else got snowed up on the way. And my sister was carted off to Germany. She wrote from Hamburg, they said, when she was still on the exchange there. 'And where's Lilya?' I ask. That was the girl next door, she worked in the laboratory at the factory. 'Oh, she got married.' 'What do you mean, got married?' 'Just what I say. Got herself a man and went off with him....' "

For a while no one said anything. Then Sagaida threw up his head, flung back his lock of hair.

"That's all right! We'll get even with them for everything. They'll be weeping bitter tears yet in Germany. We'll stamp everything out!"

"We're not wild horses to stamp on everything," Bryansky interrupted with unexpected harshness. "We're the most progressive army in the world. And that's what people expect us to be."

"Oh yes, I know you'll start preaching!" Sagaida

And, and went back to pestering Chernysh: "What that address?"

But look here, Sagaida, there can't be anything awhile in a correspondence like that, it can't really be anything to anybody," Chernysh insisted. "Writing somebody you know nothing about.... And what for? I think there's something wrong about it, something... something dirty, I would even say."

"Dirty?" Sagaida jumped up excitedly. "What do you mean, dirty? What are you trying to tell me? There's a lot about a soldier that's dirty! He may have dirty hands, dirty feet.... Often enough he has to do work that seems dirty...."

"Nonsense," said Bryansky.

"It's not nonsense! Don't fight shy of the truth, Yuri!... But that's not the point, anyway. A soldier's got to stand everything, and come through it all! Am I right, Shovkun?"

The orderly, cleaning his tommy gun in the corner, obviously didn't know what it was all about.

"Am I right or not?"

Shovkun feared Sagaida like the plague; so, with a glance at Bryansky to see if he wouldn't mind, he finally said:

"Aye, indeed."

But this submissiveness did not prevent him from exercising a quiet sense of humour at Sagaida's expense when the men would get together of an evening.

VI

If there were no trenches to dig or timbers to haul, these evenings, with the moon shining down, would be spent in easy, rambling talk.

The men would climb out of their fox holes and stretch out on the grass behind the parapet of the com-

munication trenches. The mortar positions were right on the edge of the steppe, it was like lying on the shore of a sweet-smelling sea. The tall dome of the unfamiliar southern sky, the heady fragrance of nearby fields acted like a charm: the day's arguments were forgotten, its passions subsided, and everybody got more friendly and intimate. . . .

"Who's going to reap this corn, I wonder? More likely it'll just shed and rot on the stalk."

"There's little enough of it anyway, mostly balks and weeds."

"You couldn't hope to use a combine here."

"What can they expect but weeds, without crop rotation? Keeping on planting maize, year after year!"

"Yes, it's shameful the way they misuse the land."

"And all the talk about culture!"

"Culture, indeed! Giving out the laws with a timbrel! The crier goes around the village, banging on the thing and shouting out what the law is to be. And the women lean over their fences and listen."

"He could post it on the wall and let them read it."

"Much good it would do! Their village folk are all illiterate, every mother's son of them."

"—Look, Ivan. Look, there's quitch growing here too." Lying on his belly, the man was stroking a moonlit blade of grass with his calloused hand. "Just like ours at home."

"Well, we're all living on the same earth."

"Uh-huh. And with the same sun overhead. . . ."

"—should see the 1st Battalion trenches. Went through, fetching dinner today. Some set-up! A regular underground city. Lose your way if it weren't for the markers. One arrow pointing to this company, another to that, one to the outpost, one to the club-room."

"Good thing they've got the markers."

"Talking about markers, what does our 'L' stand for, anyway?"

"For 'Lenin,' maybe?"

"More likely for our general's name."

"—the Rumanies were trying to get that outpost of ours. But the lads there kept their wits about them: let them come into the trenches, then lammed 'em with their shovels. Did for the lot, too."

"Sure, that can happen."

"—about the drive—it's starting soon, they say."

"I took a squint at those guns under the hill yesterday, going over to the dump with the sarge. More of them than you can count. The gunner boys are a fine lot, too, and no greenhorns, you can see that. Told me they've got all the Rumanie pillboxes plotted, each with a number, in fact they've given each of them a name—"

"About the names they must have been pulling your leg."

"—and they've got a gun trained on every one of 'em. Just waiting for the order to open up; every battery knows its target. Number One will take this one, Number Two the next—and they'll pound away at him until he cracks up."

"Shells aren't much good against these. But Malinovsky's going to send over a thousand planes. A plane to every pillbox."

"I hear they've got this line of pillboxes stretching from the Carpathians all the way to the Black Sea."

"Uh-huh. German engineers put 'em up."

"The lousy bastards burnt down my house."

"Well, I bricked up my storeroom and hid my eldest girl there, so they shouldn't pack her off to Germany—so they gave me such a hiding at the commandant's, my whole back was raw."

"Did you own up?"

"No fear!"

"And of my boy there's no news at all. Somewhere in the Ruhr, he was. Maybe an Allied bomb did for him. Yes . . . they've scattered our children all over the world. . . ."

"—of course, it would be rotten to lose an arm. After all, I only had two winters at school, it would be hard trying to make a living by my brainpan. Losing a leg doesn't matter so much . . . you can have a wooden leg."

"What will you do with it at night?"

"Oh, the wife would take it off!"

Someone put in a broad jest and everybody laughed, long and leisurely, taking their fill of amusement as they might of a good meal.

An accordion struck up by Battalion Headquarters, and they heard a voice singing—it was Lyonia Voikov, the battalion Komsomol organizer and a universal favourite:

The battlefields doze, like a soldier that's weary. . . .

The company officers came out of their dugout, deep in conversation, and headed for the music.

"Fine lads," a soldier said, looking after them.

"A bit on the young side, that's all."

"They may be young, but they've seen plenty. D'you know how long Bryansky's been with the regiment? Ever since it was formed. Wounded six times."

"That's why he looks so pale, then; probably lost a lot of blood in operations."

"Well, what do you think?"

"As for Sagaida, you can't figure him out: easy-going one moment, and simply savage the next. I hate it when he goes after me because they don't issue any drinks. . . . And talks about my Kilina."

"You'll be all right with them in action, though. They've smelt powder plenty, won't let you down."

"What about that new chap, the dark one, is he a

Tatar, or what? He was talking some sort of language to Magomedov."

"No, his eyes are round as a pigeon's."

"So polite to everybody, he is."

"Remember when he asked in political class who'd torn up the newspaper for smokes? I wanted to say I hadn't seen it, but I just couldn't do it. He looks right into you, somehow...."

"—my old woman writes, 'The corn's so tall, so tall, it's clean above your head. I'll never forget, Gritsya,' she says, 'the good life we had together, the days when we were young. I go and stand by the gate, evenings, with the laddie on my arm, and the wind blows warm from the South, and I like to think it comes all the way from Rumania, from you, Gritsya, my dear....'"

VII

Every day the company drilled and held political classes, according to a program Bryansky had drawn up. He would not allow the slightest deviation, just as though they were in peacetime camp, and not in forward positions before an enemy-held elevation, in this hot southern steppe. The political classes Bryansky always conducted in person.

"I'll take the company into action," he used to say, "and it's up to me to see that its morale can be depended on and won't fail either itself or me. The training I give my men will determine not only how they do their job. In the long run, my own life depends upon it. I must make sure that, whatever happens, I can rely on my company and trust it as I do myself."

Today there was exciting news. The battalion Party organizer had brought along a special issue of the paper—a leaflet about Samoilo Polishchuk, who had knocked

out six panzers single-handed in the fighting at Jassy. A government decree making Polishchuk a Hero of the Soviet Union had been telegraphed from Moscow. Within a few days, the name of this hitherto unknown infantry private was in every mouth on the Second Ukrainian Front.

In Bryansky's company the event produced a particular stir because Polishchuk came from the same parts as many of the fellows here. He wasn't some remote hero in a story, but one of themselves, an ordinary Vinnitsa tractor-driver, who had been sent up with the last batch of replacements, just like many of Bryansky's men. It wasn't so long since Polishchuk had been in a training camp back home and his wife had probably, like their own womenfolk, been bringing him pies and home-brew.

The commander of Mortar No. 3, Denis Blazhenko, a tall fellow with bushy black eyebrows, suddenly announced that he knew Polishchuk personally—long before the war they had attended the same tractor-driving classes in Yampol.

"Well, what's he like? A big fellow? A fighter? A fire-eater?"

"He's just ordinary," Blazhenko replied, frowning. "Like me, let's say. A quiet chap, nothing much of the fighter about him."

"The point isn't whether he's big or not," Bryansky explained patiently. "The thing is, he didn't lose his head at the crucial moment. The days of panzer-fright have been over for a long time now. The panzers come on, but Polishchuk's ready for them. They don't see him, but he can see them, all right. They're on the surface, while he's snug in his fox hole. At them and burn them out!"

And the men could see the sun-baked steppeland near Jassy, the man-deep trenches, and the panzers with their black crosses crawling towards them, like blind monsters emitting a hot stinking breath. And the Vinnitsa tractor-

driver standing shoulder-high in the dry earth, clutching a fire-bottle, and wailing. . . . Wailing, because he would not let these blind horrors roll over him and push again, clanging, onto Soviet soil. At them and burn them out!

"Any of you could do it," Bryansky said. "Couldn't you, now?"

"I could," Blazhenko muttered gruffly, his keen eyes blinking.

All day long the talk in the trenches was of Polishchuk's exploit. And burning eyes rested on the mute enemy-held elevation, then shifted over to the left, where the sunlit expanses of this foreign land were clad in iron and concrete all the way to the sea.

Bryansky could see that the men were especially impatient today to get to grips with the enemy. Their fighting spirit thrilled him, like strains of sublime music drawn from the instrument by himself.

"It won't be long now," he said, "before the thunder roars and lightning rips through that sky." He was walking up and down among the mortars, waving the leaflet in his hand. "It won't be long now, boys! . . ."

"Well . . . I could do it!" Blazhenko repeated, peering at the height like a hunter at his quarry.

VIII

Chernysh lay in the grass at the edge of the railway embankment, staring at the lines of pillboxes. Not a sound came from them—they might have been empty. What was going on inside them, in their concrete-lined maws? What were the garrisons doing, what were they planning and preparing for? And where on that sunny slope was the path he would be running along, ducking under the bullets—and which was the spot where he would . . . perhaps . . .

The rails on the embankment were rusty—it was a long time since any trains had passed along here; but the semaphore over to the West stood open. Chernysh only noticed it now. Who had opened it?—he wondered. And when? And where did it summon them?

“Comrade Lieutenant,” someone called below.

Turning his head, Chernysh saw one of his men, a tall quiet boy by the name of Gai. He had been admitted to the Komsomol recently, and had told them then how the Germans had hanged his brother.

“Company commander wants you,” he announced with a smile. His cap was too small and perched comically on the back of his head.

“He’s back already, is he?”

Chernysh knew that Bryansky had gone to a Party meeting at Regimental Headquarters.

“Yes, he’s back.”

Chernysh jumped down and hurriedly set himself to rights. As they went, Gai kept glancing round at him, smiling rather queerly and blinking as if he were going to sneeze. He was fidgety about something. “It’s the drive,” Chernysh thought. “The drive’s starting!”

“Feeling rattled?” he asked.

“No.... Only sort of ... kindly towards everybody....” He looked round to see if Chernysh wasn’t laughing.

“You’re simply ... rattled,” Chernysh said.

“Oh no, I’m not,” Gai returned stoutly. “I’m not rattled. Not a bit of it. I’ve got plenty of nerve, Comrade Lieutenant!”

He glanced over his shoulder again: the lieutenant wasn’t laughing, was he?

“All the times they tried to pack me off to Germany, I hopped off the train; others didn’t dare—it was going top speed. The last time was over beyond Warsaw. I sprained my foot doing it that time, and you know the

Poles carted me from village to village, passed me on from one to another, all the way to the Ukraine. 'Cause they hate the Fritzes too. . . . I wanted to ask you, Comrade Lieutenant . . . just in case . . . here's the address. . . ."

He fumbled in his blouse and drew a slip of paper from an inside pocket.

"If anything happens, let her know. . . . I haven't anybody else. . . ."

The writing on the slip had spread—when he sweat-ed, probably. Handing it over, he blinked harder than ever and went on bashfully:

"I'd take it kindly if you'd write . . . and try to make it sound good . . . nice and sad . . . let her cry a bit. . . . Don't worry, it won't kill her!" he added gruffly.

Chernysh wanted to say something encouraging, but he didn't know how to.

"Don't fret," was all he said. "Nothing will happen to you."

"I'm not fretting," the lad grinned. "What have I to fret about? I'm not a traitor or a villain, I haven't done anything wrong. Dying for the right is easy. When they brought my brother and the others from the woods, all trussed up, and stopped the cart under the gallows, the women started wailing, but my brother, he looks around and says: 'It hurts to part from you, my native Polesse, and from you too, clear shining sun! But I don't regret anything!' And when the driver lashed out and pulled the cart from under him, he said again, 'I don't regret anything. I've nothing to regret.'"

At the mortar-post, things were humming. Bryansky was directing the preparations himself, walking back and forth on the parapet in his canvas boots and issuing brief orders. The camouflage nets had been taken down. The men were bringing up boxes of ammunition, unpacking and sharing out grenades, getting their issue of cartridges; everybody was bustling about. A look at

Bryansky finally convinced Chernysh that this was going to be no ordinary day. There was something impressive about Bryansky today. Buttoned up closely and with his belt drawn tight, he stood on the parapet, and again Chernysh thought of a sunflower in bloom. Bryansky's blue eyes searched his subordinate's face.

"Heard the news?" he asked. "The show's starting at last. A big show, my friend!"

Chernysh thought: "He's sizing up how I'll make out in action."

"Splendid," he answered.

"I'm going over to the O.P.," said Bryansky. "You'll stay here with Sagaida."

Taking Chernysh's arm, he added confidentially:

"Look here, all kinds of things can happen: after all, this is the first time most of our men are going into action. For instance, I may be calling for 'Fire,' and here the enemy is shelling you all the time; somebody may lose his nerve and dive into a dugout. . . . Mustn't hesitate to act prompt about anything like that. This is one time when you can't afford to be soft. And make sure the men don't ball up the sights in the excitement. Check 'em up yourself every time. As a matter of fact, I'm sure everything will be all right. We've got a fine lot of fellows. Look how they've shined up the metal, you can see your face in it."

Bryansky sent the orderly to get his binoculars, then he called to Sagaida, who came running up, his heavy boots clattering. He too was very smart and important today and reported stiffly, with all the formalities:

"Comrade Guards Senior Lieutenant, Guards Lieutenant Sagaida. . . ."

"You'll stay in command here," Bryansky broke in.

"Very good."

Bryansky looked at his watch.

"The music should be starting in fifty minutes now."

He took the binoculars and slung them around his neck. Then he put out his hand to Sagaida and the two men exchanged a quick, rough embrace; this was a long-standing custom of theirs before going into action. Taking leave of the troops, who had clustered around and were wishing him good luck, Bryansky reassured them:

"Don't worry about me, boys! I know I'll be all right."

"You never can tell.... A splinter might come your way...."

"Well, of course, it might ... and ... other things do happen too. But after all, is death the worst that can happen? There's a worse thing, and that's dishonour! Dishonour before your country. That's something to fear more than death itself. Each of us has a wife and children at home, or a mother, or a sweetheart. They're looking at us from over beyond the Pruth. And looking at us through their eyes is our country itself, which sent us to fight for its honour and independence. You know what it expects of us? You know it, don't you?"

"We do," the men chorused.

"Good! I'm relying on you!..."

Bryansky leapt down into the deep trench leading to the infantry positions. Shovkun followed, with tommy gun, water bottle and groundsheet.

Everything was in readiness. The crews took up their stations and froze into immobility, waiting tensely, as if for the sun to go out. Their commanders made a final check of the equipment.

Not a single explosion. Not one shot.

Chernysh glanced impatiently at his watch. The soldiers were grave, intent, like men suddenly feeling the weight of an immense responsibility. It seemed to magnify their stature in their own eyes, and their expression set and hardened. Looking about him, Chernysh no

longer saw the familiar, good-natured, smiling faces he knew.

A tremendous awesome silence hung over the steppe.

The next moment, music of indescribable grandeur seemed to have struck up, the whole sky seemed to have turned into a vast blue organ and started playing.

*"Katyushas!"**

The sky rustled, invisible waves of dense, solid sound rushed over their heads. Flashes of lightning struck, the earth rumbled beneath a pall of smoke. And a great roar came from the hill. It was as if an engineer had switched on the current, and the huge, complex mechanism of war had started working, smoothly and rhythmically.

In the dugout, the telephone-operator pressed the receiver to his head, covering his other ear, so as to hear only what Bryansky was saying at the observation post. The ceiling kept crumbling, raining clods on the table and the operator's head.

... Sagaida was hoarse with shouting orders. He stood at the dugout entrance with a pad in his hand, the perspiration streaming down his face. Chernysh, repeating the orders to the mortar crews, would have liked to sing them like music. He bellowed for all he was worth, but the crews, though so close, could barely hear him in that infernal din. The mortar-barrels were already too hot to touch. The earth muttered and cracked at spot after spot, belching thunder and flame mingled with smoke. Fumes filled the air, it tasted bitter. And Chernysh went on and on calling out the terse figures.

Planes came over in close, tight wedges and wheeled over the pillboxes. At this moment more than ever before, Chernysh felt with pride that he was the son of a mighty power. He was proud that Urals metal was shaking the alien skies overhead, that from somewhere behind him the shells of *Katyushas* came cleaving the

* This was the nickname of the Red Army's rocket guns.

air. Those flaming trajectories that streaked like lightning from east to west were stormy petrels heralding speedy liberation for the nations of Europe.

You couldn't hear the shots—nothing but the incessant thundering of earth and sky; the only individual sounds were the explosions of the aerial bombs, like immensely tall fortresses toppling to the ground. There was a perpetual ringing in your ears, as after a hard blow on the head. Chernysh couldn't keep from running up the embankment to take a look. The height was not to be seen; it had disappeared; from the top to the very foot it was a solid roaring mass, a huge confusion of smoke.

Suddenly there was a whistling in the sky, it approached with incredible speed and seemed to Chernysh to be heading straight for him. But he did not feel the least bit afraid. Nothing in this deafening chaos frightened him at all; it seemed a sort of natural phenomenon, like a simoom.

The thing whistling overhead darted suddenly to the ground, emitting a dry grunt. The hot blast robbed Chernysh of his breath, hurled him aside, and the next thing he knew he was down in the trench, squeezed against the side, practically on his hands and knees. He looked to see if he wasn't being laughed at, but heard instead someone ask anxiously:

"Did it hit you?"

Hit him? Why, could he be hit? As simply as that? . . . Some twisted rail-sections flew clanging over his head. Another explosion, that bitter taste again, no air. . . . And yet, quite automatically, he was hearing all the time what he needed to hear; and when No. 3 suddenly ceased firing, he was aware of it on the instant. He rushed over. The man who had the job of loading on No. 3, Roman Blazhenko, was down on one knee on the clayey soil, and his younger brother Denis, the

commander of the mortar, was deftly drawing off his shirt. Roman had a muscular white body, only his neck down to the collar-line was burnt a deep brown, which was the more noticeable now by contrast. A shell splinter had gashed his arm above the elbow, and bright red blood was spurting from the wound, dripping down the white elbow and onto the ground. Roman looked at it doubtfully, moving his long whiskers.

"It didn't touch the bone," Denis reassured him, binding up the wound.

"Hurt much?" Chernysh asked.

"No," the wounded man answered. "Only it's a shame about the blood. All that good blood wasted. Now then, Denis, hurry up."

Although Denis had a corporal's rank and carried much more weight with the company than Roman, the family relation of seniority still remained, and Denis obeyed his elder brother implicitly, as he might his father.

"Hurry up and get to the clearing station," Chernysh ordered. He felt queer, realizing all of a sudden that he too might be wounded or killed.

This mention of the clearing station completely upset the brothers.

"Comrade Lieutenant... Comrade Lieutenant..." both of them started together.

"Don't make me go to the clearing station. Don't, Comrade Lieutenant," Roman begged. "And don't say anything just now to Lieutenant Sagaida...."

Chernysh was puzzled.

"But why?"

"It'll get better here.... It'll skin over.... I'll do everything I have to... even shoot...."

"But there they'd heal it faster, wouldn't they?"

"Don't make me go, Comrade Lieutenant.... Please don't!" Roman's lined brown face showed positive alarm,

his whiskers hung down piteously. "My brother's here. He was the vet's aide in our *kolkhoz*...."

"I'll take care of him myself," Denis put in earnestly.

"All our chaps are here.... And at the station, they're liable to send me somewhere else when I'm better... and I'll never get back here."

"And suppose it gets infected?"

"It won't," Denis declared. "I've got all sorts of medicines here, and herbs...."

"Well, mind it doesn't!..."

Chernysh put another man on to load, and told Roman to shelter in the dugout. The wounded man gulped.

"Good luck to you, Comrade Lieutenant!"

He had a very tender and affectionate heart, had the elder Blazhenko.

IX

The time for the barrage was up, and the din was subsiding gradually, like the sea after a storm. Now that only single batteries and mortars were firing, everybody could hear a steady, even rumbling far over on the left. They listened as if spellbound.

"It's over by Jassy!"

"That means it's starting all along the line!"

The smoke was thinning, and parts of the height emerged once more from the tawny clouds. The whole of it had been ploughed up by shells in that one hour. It seemed strange that it still existed at all. Yet even the pillboxes were still there, only they were quite bare now—the earth had been blasted away—and loomed on the slopes like enormous white skulls.

The young telephone-operator popped suddenly out of his dugout, his round head bare and his shoulders

littered with earth, shouted at the top of his voice, "The infantry's going over!" and disappeared again.

"The infantry's going over!" The words flashed like lightning from man to man, even to the gunners beyond the hill.

"They're going over!"

"They've started! They're moving! . . ."

Like word of the highest hope, the magic news travelled all down the line, through the staffs and batteries, and to the depots in the rear. The infantry was going over! If there had been bands there, they would have greeted the news with a triumphal march!

With bated breath, Chernysh saw through the smoke little grey spots appearing on the slopes of the elevation. Tiny, barely visible, they kept all eyes riveted upon them. Time and again they vanished in the explosions, seemed to disappear for good; but the smoke cleared, and the little grey things came to life again and crawled up the incline like ants after a shower. And everybody, from the gun layer to the general, watched these moving grey dots without taking his eyes from them. This was a living force that nothing could withstand.

From the command post, Bryansky gave orders for the company to shift to the very foot of the elevation. Sagaida appeared on the parapet tousled and beaming, and gave the order he loved best in the world:

"Cease fire! Dismantle!"

That meant—advance. The telephone-operator proudly informed Headquarters:

"I'm disconnecting."

In a few minutes, the weapon-pits were empty. The heavy base-plates, the bipods, the barrels were already on the backs of their crews, and the men were going down with them into the trench.

Standing in a recess at the side, Sagaida let the company file past and made sure nothing had been forgot-

ten. At the head of the file, treading with a buoyant elasticity, came Chernysh, face flushed, head raised, large clear eyes shining under dark brows delicate as a girl's. There came tall Buzko, bending under his burden and looking down at his feet as if he wanted to memorize every step he took. Khoma Khayetsky, that irrepressible wag, strode along rapidly, his magnificent whiskers twisted into the semblance of a ram's horns. Gai was hung all over with trenching tools, and they rattled on him like the armour on some knight of old; he looked at Sagaida, at the other men, at everything around him, with a frank, good-natured gaze. There were the inseparable Blazhenko brothers, the grime making their faces look darker than ever. Denis had his mortar-barrel on his shoulder and was carrying the sights as well; Roman held the loading-tray in his uninjured hand.

"Blazhenko!" Sagaida called to the elder, but both of them stopped.

"Yes, Comrade Lieutenant of the Guards?"

"How many times have I told you it's Guards Lieutenant, not Lieutenant of the Guards?"

"Beg pardon, I forgot, Comrade... Lieutenant of the Guards!"

"Hand over that tray!"

"He's in my crew," Denis interposed. "He's carrying it on my orders."

"Hand it over!"

"Comrade Guards Lieutenant," Denis insisted, "you know, you can't cancel my orders over my head. A combat order is...."

"So you know the regulations, do you?" Sagaida said, and took away Roman's tray by force, demanding:

"Why didn't you report you were wounded? Off you go!"

Roman blinked, looking from Sagaida to Denis and back again.

"Off you go . . . with your brother!"

Sagaida picked up the tray himself and set off too, bringing up the rear of the company.

The trench went down and down. Sagaida could see nearly all the men's heads and their bronzed, sinewy necks. The heads bobbed up and down, as if they had no bodies belonging to them and were floating in a stream, rocking gently. In some places the trench was timbered over, and entering one of these dark tunnels, Khoma Khayetsky called out in his Podolya singsong:

"Oh dearie, dearie me! . . . It's like going down to hell!"

"You thought you were going to heaven, did you?" somebody laughed.

That night the mortars entrenched in their new post, in a gully at the foot of the elevation. Sleep was out of the question. The action was still going on. By nightfall, pillboxes 14, 17 and 18 had been captured; a number of others were surrounded, but their fire still raked nearly all the ground we had gained. The company was digging in. The men worked, panting; the picks slashed away in the dark, striking sparks when they hit on stones.

With nightfall, ammunition columns made for the height, clattering over a road which the day's bombardment had littered with shattered carts and horses' carcasses. Picking their way among the wreckage, they rattled through the darkness, rushed up to the foot of the hill, swung round, piled out the ammunition boxes and dashed off for the next consignment. A whole mountain of ammunition grew up, and Bryansky detailed nearly half the company to haul it up to the action station.

Like a procession of shadows, the men wandered

through the night with the boxes on their backs, dropping on their faces whenever a shell bit into the hard ground nearby. Khayetsky, blessed with a remarkably keen hearing, was always first to catch the approaching screech of a shell or the whine of a heavy mortar-bomb.

"Here she comes!" he called, himself already flat on the ground, like a withered autumn leaf. The blouse gathered in folds on his back.

"Oh dearie, dearie me!"

He was certain for some reason that a bomb would bore into the small of his back. Not his arm or his leg, but his back; he could already feel the chills running down it. He dug his fingers into the ground, breaking his nails, and whispered:

"Don't let it get me!"

The shell dropped wide of them, sending splinters whistling over their heads and thudding down on the ground like so many ripe pears. Khayetsky thereupon lifted his head before anybody else, whiskers thrust jauntily forward.

"Look where it's dropped!" he announced, as if the others hadn't seen it.

"Get up!" Chernysh ordered.

The men shouldered their loads in silence and pushed on, stooping under the weight.

"Everybody there?"

"Sure they are!"

This was already their fourth trip that night.

"A smoke would be good," someone said close behind Chernysh. On the eve of the drive the troops had been issued tobacco.

There was a trench of some sort running nearby; Chernysh said they might halt in it and light up.

It was past midnight. The men put down the boxes on the parapet, so they would be easier to pick up,

and squatted down. The impressions of the day's fighting, and the hard work they were doing now, had been exhausting. But the safety of the trench had an instantaneous tonic effect. Cigarette-ends gleamed and tongues began to wag. "How little a man needs to laugh and feel contented," Chernysh found himself thinking.

"We had a Rumanian commandant, the *pretor* they called him," Khayetsky was relating in his singsong voice. "So I used to go along every day to ask for my cow back, and he used to have me whipped regular."

The others laughed.

"And you kept on going, did you?"

"Yes, I did, brother . . . may his bones be ground to powder!"

"And he gave it back, did he?"

"Like hell he did. Took it off with him to Bucharest."

"It's grazing there now, in the market-place."

"Well, if I see it, I'm taking it back."

"Pulling out, they sang: 'Antonescu, he gave orders, 'Take the Caucasus, my soldiers.' But the soldiers weren't fooled, up they got and out they pulled.'"

"They sang out all right when the Ukraine got too hot to hold them."

"Look what they've built here, though—there's no budging it."

"They'll take to their heels all the same when things begin to get hot."

"May they vanish with the smoke and soot!"

Chernysh got up.

"Come on."

The night was blue and cool. Here and there the scarlet flowers of the explosions were still blossoming. On the elevation, flares hung for a few moments over the lines of infantry, then dropped to earth like dazzling ears of corn under the sickle. And over beyond

it, the whole sky glowed with a dim, sinister glow. The Rumanian rear, the whole of Rumania was aflame.

"Drat you!" This suddenly from Gai.

"What's the matter?"

"There's an arm here...."

Chernysh bent over the parapet and saw a twisted arm that hung down into the trench. It was in the way, and with a feeling of squeamishness that he did not like to admit, he picked it up and flung it aside. Though cold and hard, it left his hand sticky. He kept rubbing earth on the palm as he went, but for days after, whenever he started to eat, his hands seemed to give off a sickening odour.

They were nearing the worst spot of all, a small glade at the entrance to the gully. It was still swept by enemy machine guns, so Chernysh gave orders to lie down, and dropped down himself. He squirmed over the pitted, stinking ground. Bullets sang all the time, some passing overhead, others burying themselves close by in something soft, like dough. Corpses kept blocking the way. And behind him, the men crawled, panting heavily as they dragged the boxes after them.

There were moments when Chernysh felt as if it weren't night at all, but broad daylight, and the enemy could see everything, down to the star on his cap. He would hide his head behind some dead body while he fought down this fancy; then, every nerve and fibre tensed, he pushed on, knees and elbows scraping, as if he were swimming over something hard and bumpy.

Suddenly there was a scream behind him, a horrible full-voiced scream, especially terrifying here in the dark, where they had hardly raised their voices above a whisper.

"Brothers! Pals!..."

The voice, shrill and piercing, was so inhumanly distorted that Chernysh could not tell whose it was.

“Brothers! . . .”

So bloodcurdling was that scream in the night that surely everyone must hear it on the whole of this great hill, on both of its slopes—everyone must come rushing to save this human life.

But instead Chernysh felt himself driven forward, away from that scream, and he could hear the men behind him crawling quicker too, and their breath coming faster and more laboured. Bullets whistled thicker and thicker through the air. At last Chernysh got to a rock where they could shelter and pause. The bullets didn't reach here.

“What have I done?” he thought with sudden horror. “What have I done?”

The men were appearing out of the dark and gathering silently around him, without lifting their heads from the ground.

“Who's missing?” Chernysh all but shrieked, angry he knew not with whom. “Who's missing?”

Two men were missing. Buzko and Vakulenko. Chernysh, ready to do anything, turned desperately and crawled back. Let him be killed, but he couldn't face Bryansky that way. Somebody grabbed his foot.

“Don't. . . . Let me. . . .”

It was Gai. Without waiting for an answer, he rustled off in the dark like an eel and headed in the direction of the groans, picking his way among the corpses. Bullets sang and plopped; once in a while they gave a ring, probably against somebody's trenching tool. Gai took no notice of these sounds, he could hear another that was infinitely more important: a quiet gurgling, like pigeons cooing in the sun. He put out his hand and felt a body, still warm, and dank with sweat. By the homemade boot he could tell that it was Buzko. The body shrank, straightened out, shrank again, and all the time there was the sound of that soft cooing—blood spurting from under

the armpit. Gai put his ear to Buzko's chest. A hush fell, as if the whole of the universe were mute with amazement: the heart had ceased to beat.

Gai rummaged in the pockels, took out Buzko's purse and stock of cartridges, and pushed on again. A few yards further along he found Vakulenko; his cap had slipped off and his big bald head gleamed in the dark. This one had been killed outright: the bullet had entered the neck and come out on the other side.

Back at the rock, Gai handed over the two men's belongings to Chernysh, keeping back only the cartridges. They all got up again, giving one another a hand with the 100-pound boxes. Machine guns chattered in the dark. Flares tried to reach the sky, only to sink exhausted to the ground and die in a scattering of cold sparks. No one said a word all the way.

At the mortar-post, Chernysh sought out Bryansky and reported that the ammunition party was back and two men had been killed. Bryansky listened gravely, asked about the details.

"A pity," he said after a pause. "A pity. Particularly about Vakulenko. He would have made a good gunner in time. I was watching him. Well. . . ." Bryansky looked pensive for a moment. "Well . . . take your men, old fellow, and . . . off you go again. Ammunition's the word, my lad. There'll be another show in the morning."

Chernysh saluted and gave the order for the fifth trip.

X

A "show" did start in the morning, and never stopped all day. All the infantry battalions were brought into action, and they surrounded some pillboxes that were still firing on the left. The enemy, for his part, had also brought up considerable infantry troops and was send-

ing them over in one counter-attack after another, frantic to save the trapped pillbox garrisons. Several times the infantry came to close quarters on the very crest of the hill.

The roar and din never ceased; a pall of smoke hung over the elevation, obscuring the sun.

Bryansky was controlling the fire from the observation post of No. 7 Company. He had orders to concentrate on a vital Rumanian trench, which ran to the height from the enemy rear lines, weaving into the intricate pattern of the defences. His periscope gave him a fine view of this trench, he could actually see that its sides were lined with wickerwork. He had been pounding and pounding it ever since morning. In correcting the aim, he hardly glanced at the gunnery tables—he knew them practically by heart, his mathematical memory was extraordinarily well developed.

When a bomb struck outside the trench, even if only a few yards away, Bryansky could not contain his exasperation.

“Bunglers! Bunglers! Bunglers!” he muttered after every poor shot; eyes glued to the target, he cursed into the mouthpiece and ordered them to repeat his figures—he was sure the men must have balled them up.

When, on the other hand, the bomb landed full on the trench, filling it with smoke, Bryansky’s face lit up with satisfaction. He would seize Shovkun by the shoulder and make him look.

“See that? Straddle! Plumb on the target! Good man! Well done!”

And he’d make a hurried note on his pad. To Bryansky the management of every action was a creative process, something to be studied and profited by. His opinion of an engagement was based not only on the final results, although these were, of course, the main thing. He took into account the efficiency of preparations

and execution, the way the different factors had been brought to bear and the inevitable complications and surprises had been dealt with. Even the smallest of skirmishes was for Bryansky either "sloppy," as he used to put it—with needless casualties—or clean-cut, exact, with losses kept down to the minimum. When the company commanders were summoned to Battalion Headquarters to analyse the latest engagement, Bryansky would say:

"The enemy group in such-and-such a wood was mopped up neatly, efficiently, artistically."

The infantry officers used to chaff him about it.

"Particularly 'artistic,'" they'd say, "was the way Sergeant Novikov stuck his bayonet into that German N.C.O., just below the belly-button!"

And now too, while directing the fire of his own company, Bryansky was keeping track of what the other mortar companies and batteries were doing; and all his observations he passed on to Shovkun.

"Look, look how Sergeyev's laying down that fan-pattern! Just you look at him! He's got them! Got the whole lot of them!"

Shovkun, who didn't know any Sergeyev and had the faintest of nodding acquaintances with fan-patterns, marvelled not a little at his chief's irrepressible energy.

"But surely, Comrade Lieutenant, you don't have to trouble your head about that Sergeyev?" he ventured mildly. "Haven't you enough to do with your own company? Are you responsible for that Sergeyev too?"

"Shovkun!" Bryansky was unwontedly stern. "We're responsible for everybody—and everything!"

And leaning on the dry clay of the parapet, he turned back to the scene of action.

Meanwhile, the gully below, where his mortars were stationed, was in an uproar. The overheated mortars croaked, men shouted, cursed, ran back and forth. An outsider might have thought they had gone mad and did

not know what they were doing, trapped in this cage filled with sweltering heat. Only on looking more closely would he have realized that clockwork order and efficiency prevailed here.

This was the one relatively safe spot near the elevation, and everybody who had the right and opportunity had collected in it. Besides Bryansky's mortars, the battalion command post was here with all its personnel, even down to the clerks. These, with their endless despatches spread out on their knees, lent the scene a particularly business-like and confident air. Then again, the dressing stations of two battalions had pitched camp in the gully, and by now there were several dozen wounded gathered around them. They lay or sat about at the bottom, waiting for night to fall. A staff officer with a Moldavian interpreter was questioning the day's first prisoners. They were still crazed with fright, wet with perspiration, and could remember nothing but our bombardment of the day before. A shell-shocked sergeant, stammering and talking very loud, was telling some lightly wounded men about a charge he'd laid under a pillbox—the thing had stunned him because he hadn't got far enough away when it went off. Another fellow, a mere lad of a Georgian, was describing comically how he'd caught a Fritz who, not expecting visitors, had opened the armour-plated rear door of his pillbox.

"Bună ziua, I says. Then I whack him over the head with my rifle-butt and chuck in a grenade through the doorway...."

The heat was unbearable. The gully was brimming with a transparent, shimmering blaze. And not a breeze to stir the hot air.

Bryansky's men stood by the mortars, sweating hard, and dark as blackamoors. But their spirits were high, for all the time news was coming through of more pillboxes being captured.

Khayelsky sat putting extra charges into the bombs. His face was all grimy and his eyes red for lack of sleep, but he kept up a steady stream of banter, and his white teeth flashed in a grin beneath his whiskers.

"Comrade Lieutenant," he called to Sagaida, tossing a bomb lightly in his hand. "Won't some Fritz like to catch this little pickle?"

A shell burst somewhere further up, and splinters chortled overhead like a flock of well-fed quails. This disturbed Khayetsky a little, and, throwing up his head, he brandished the bomb in the enemy's direction.

"You can't do that, you know," he shouted, to the whole company's amusement. "Where are you shooting? What do you want? D'you mean to say you're trying to kill me? That wouldn't be a very nice thing to do. I've got a wife at home, and two youngsters, and my old father. Yes, indeed, I've got to live...."

Roman Blazhenko was charging bombs too. It was light work and his wound didn't interfere.

"I'd be ashamed to sit idle," he said, "when everybody's got so much to do, more than they can manage.... After all, I get my rations like everybody else."

Everybody knew he was a fiend for work. Without it he languished, like corn in a drought. Roman was a quiet and gentle soul. Sometimes he and Denis, like a couple of singers at a fair, would start up a plaintive ditty that they alone knew about "the sand that's covered up my true love's tracks," and before very long Roman would be in melting mood. But no one ventured to laugh at him or molest him because there was Denis to be reckoned with—a husky fellow of some thirty years, with beetling black brows, the eye of a hawk, and always ready to take up the cudgels for his brother.

Over the telephone crouched Makovei—they all called him by the pet-name of Makoveichik, because he was just a kid, only 18, and had a nice likable face with a

funny broad nose. Makoveichik was short, but he had a tremendous chest that was always thrust out, and on his shoulders perched a big mobile head, which, Sagaida used to say, had been meant for a giant and had landed in Makoveichik's possession by mistake. Sagaida thought it a great lark to pass his outspread palm over Makoveichik's head, from the top right down to the chin.

"Don't, now! Don't maul!" Makoveichik would cry, and he'd go for Sagaida, because this "mauling" meant that right now you could fool around with the lieutenant too.

When the company was still in reserve and used to sing a lot in the evenings, Bryansky had got Makoveichik transferred from the infantry because he was a great one for starting off the singing. Sometimes these musical gifts got him into hot water. On duty at the phone at night, he would start warbling into the mouthpiece to kill time, fascinating unknown and unseen telephone girls, until the furious commander of signals would give him three fatigues out of turn and threaten to break the ear-phones over his head into the bargain. Sagaida, however, refused to let any man of his be punished by anyone else, so instead of the fatigues, he would give Makoveichik three "mauls" with his palm, and there the punishment would end.

But just now Makoveichik had other things than singing to think about. He sat curled up over the telephone, with the ear-phones tied to his head. He passed on Bryansky's orders, his praises and curses, and also snatches of overheard conversations about the position with the pillboxes; and all the time he was hoping and praying the connection mightn't be broken again. Six times today he had gone running up the open slope to mend the line, and each time the older men had looked after him compassionately, as if he were going to his death—for everybody was really very fond of him. True,

he didn't come from their own part of the country and even poked fun saucily at their way of talking. But they didn't really mind—the kid was young enough to be the son of most of them, and perhaps he reminded them of their own children and the warmth of hearth and home. Each time he came back from the line, appearing suddenly on the ledge above them and jumping down as if from the sky, the company would give a sigh of relief:

“Makoveichik! Safe and sound!”

And Sagaida, as a sign of special favour, would “maul” him a few times when he got him in his clutches.

But the line did break again. Loth to believe it, Makoveichik shouted into the mouthpiece for a while and swore at his opposite number at the observation post. But no reply came and, swearing under his breath, he clambered out of the trench. He asked Khayetsky for his pocket-knife to trim the ends of the wire. Khoma didn't like to part with the knife, and spent a long time rummaging for it in pockets crammed with miscellaneous belongings.

“Hurry up!” Makoveichik called. “I can see you grudge handing it over!”

“Mind you don't lose it, now!”

“Suppose I don't come back myself?”

“I want that knife back regardless.”

Makoveichik took hold of the wire and followed it. At first the line ran between clumps of trees, and he felt safe enough. But now it was stretching uphill, and pretty soon Makoveichik was out in the open. He had a feeling of being stark naked. No one anywhere, the grass all burnt up, and shells bursting all over the hillside. He flattened on the ground and squirmed forward, the wire in his hand skinning his fingers. The line entered a disused trench, ran along it for a while, then emerged again and stretched on up the slope.

The sun stood high overhead. The perspiration poured

into Makoveichik's eyes and his lips were dry and salty. A shell dropped nearby. The hot blast swept over him, he felt to see if he was whole, and squirmed on again through the acrid, suffocating powder-smoke, alone as if he were in a desert waste. Looking at this height, he had never imagined it was so big—and now he seemed to have been crawling over it a solid hour. Here at last was the break in the wire. He used his teeth to trim the ends, forgetting about the knife in his pocket. The break mended, he started back. It was much easier downhill. He felt good at having fixed the line and the shells didn't seem quite so bad any more. There was still a battered tree standing here and there; some of the flowers hadn't been mown down yet and smelt sweet as they drooped in the heat. Makoveichik's heart felt light and free; there was so much sunlight around that the very sky was a dazzling white; and down below, a long way off, beyond the embankment, you could see the meadows, with the quivering haze over them looking like a flock of pearly white ewes. And in those meadows, Makoveichik recalled, white-trouserred Rumanians were out grazing their flocks, and the sheep had little tinkling bells around their necks.

Sunny springtime choruses sang in the little telephone-operator's heart.

XI

At last the height fell.

This was the following night, just before daybreak, and Makoveichik was the first to hear about it. All at once the line was alive with a delighted buzz of congratulations. The Rumanians had fallen back during the night. No one knew yet that they had fallen back for the last time, that that night flame-enveloped Rumania had surrendered.

The infantry was on the move. Signalsmen strolled about the slopes, winding the wire on their reels; the supply columns rolled towards the height, and this time they did not come back, but stayed there at the foot of it, a huge noisy camp. The morning was fine and clear, as after a fall of rain and hail. Demolition squads laid dozens of kilograms of explosive under the empty pill-boxes, and these rose roaring out of the ground and reared up on end, practically undamaged; they reminded one of fantastic monsters, their metal girders thrust out like misshapen paws.

With the mortars on their backs, Bryansky's men got moving. The bracing freshness of the summer morning laved their sleepless eyes and cooled their battle-grimed, long unwashed faces as one after another they climbed the slope in Bryansky's wake. The backs of their shirts had faded in these past few days, and were stiff with dried perspiration.

Ahead of Chernysh moved Gai, bending under a heavy base-plate that Buzko had been cleaning and carrying only a few days before. Slung there on his back, it gleamed in the sun like a ploughshare.

At the top they paused to rest. Far over on the right, the Carpathian summits shone rosy in the morning sun. The quiet, peaceful Sereth wound sparkling among the grey-green fields. As far as the eye could see, leafy villages dotted the misty plain, with white churches rising above their profuse orchards. One might think there had never been any war there at all, and no one had ever heard about it. Surely the cattle lowed there just as they always had done when driven out in the mornings, and an ancient old man went about the streets, shouting out the laws to the sound of his cymbals. And only this height here stood scorched, pitted, gashed, as if a hurricane had swept over it, covering it with corpses and tatters of clothing, with abandoned weapons, gas-masks

and all the rubbish with which war litters the earth. And rearing over all this wreckage of death were the concrete pillboxes that our sappers had blasted out of the ground.

"Pull them up, pull them up," Khayetsky cried, as if the sappers could hear him. "Pull them up, right by their iron roots! And we'll uproot the bastards who spread this filth on earth."

Parties of sappers probed the whole slope with mine-detectors, marked the minefields, cleared lanes for the troops into the wide world beyond.

"L" . . . "L" New wooden markers sprang up on the hill.

Everyone was in high spirits, because in the light of this August morning the world lay before them clean, as if newly bathed—and because the enemy was falling back—and because they were still alive and had a chance, after all this time, to straighten up and breathe. There wasn't a shot to be heard.

"There's the trench we were firing at," Bryansky said, and everybody wanted to have a look at the results of their work.

Eyes on the ground, to avoid stepping on mines, they made their way towards it.

The trench was a horrible sight, a jumble of clay, of bloodstained rags, of yellow corpses frozen in all manner of attitudes. One was without his boots, his feet wrapped in rags; he sat with his back against the side of the trench, head bent as if in meditation. Another had his face buried in this man's lap; dirty linen hung out of the open kitbag on his back. A third lay beside them, half covered with earth.

Ignoring the corpses, Bryansky sized up with a professional eye where the bombs had fallen.

"Burst on the parapet. . . . Hit the side—rather an

interesting hit.... And here's one that dropped plumb to the bottom.... Not so dusty!"

Turning to his officers, he went on:

"I made some very interesting observations in this action. I have an idea that with a little adjustment, the pattern of fire we've been using for this type of trench could be much more effective.... Look, here's the angle we had on this target...."

And he proceeded to enlarge on his theory, looking at Chernysh.

"You have a whole swarm of ideas after every show," said Sagaida, who was evidently used to it. "Anyway, we gave them what-for. And you kept yelling we were bungling!"

Denis Blazhenko climbed down silently into the trench and brought up some grey splinters.

"Those are from my mortar," he announced, with a dour look at Bryansky.

The splinters passed from hand to hand.

"How do you know they're yours?"

"Those are my markings. I've got them written down."

"Don't worry, Blazhenko," Bryansky smiled. "I remember everything. Every honest soldier of mine will get his due."

They went on along the ridge, jumping over trenches and inspecting all the shell-holes on the way. A signaller from Battalion Headquarters showed them the path the infantry had taken.

Swaying here and there on the hilltop were fluffy white bunches of feather grass, that singing grass of the steppes that hums delicately in the lightest breeze. From what steppe, by what wind, had its seeds been brought here and sown on this hillside—by what miracle had it escaped the fire and raining metal of these past few days? Here and there by the shell holes there

were grizzly patches of wormwood and clumps of sweet-smelling thyme; and Gai, stooping under his heavy burden, would yet bend down to pluck a fragrant handful. Holding up his face to the sun, he would drink in the scent and look about him, friendlier than ever, smiling at the world at large.

"It smells right," he would say, "that's our kind of grass.... Smells just like back home."

He had an extraordinary love for plants and scents, this young boy from the Polessye.

"You ought to make a wreath of these flowers, like a girl," the men laughed.

"I would if there was time," Gai answered, blushing. "I can, you know."

Everybody was looking for something, as if there were jewels scattered here. They picked up with interest anything that happened to catch their eye, twisted it about, then tossed it away and looked for something again—until suddenly there was a thundering explosion, and the clear morning clouded over all at once: Gai had trodden on a mine.

Only a moment before, Chernysh had seen him. He had been standing over some blue cornflowers, smiling gently down at them. He bent down, plucked a flower lovingly, took one step—and then the earth gave a roar and everything vanished in smoke. A black column of it went up where Gai had stood; and when it cleared, there was nothing there, as if the boy had caught fire and burnt up instantly.

They took off the smoke-blackened base-plate that pinned him to the ground. Freed from the bloodstained canvas straps, his body seemed to heave a sigh, then sagged nervelessly to the ground. Gai lay stretched out full length, and only now did they notice how well-made he was, slender yet broad of shoulder—a comely lad. His fair silky eyebrows lay on his face like two strands

of feather grass that boisterous winds had brought here from the eastern steppes. He gazed up at the clear sky, with a trusting and slightly surprised air, and his eyes were bluer than the sky itself, the intense transparent blue of sapphire. And gripped still, amazingly, in his dead fingers were the blue cornflowers, withered by the blast. So they buried him, with these wild flowers that had reminded him of home.

With much difficulty, they pieced together his tattered papers. In the same pocket was a handful of tommy-gun cartridges. Makoveichik scooped them out and poured them into his own pocket. He did not know that he was already their third owner.

Gai's death left them heavy of heart—the more so, perhaps, because he had not been killed yesterday, in the heat of the fighting, but on this quiet morning, when everything around was so serene and the boundless plain breathed the profusion of the South.

The men trudged, grim and silent, glancing askance at the strange unfamiliar country below and at the distant white towns, where they had not yet been, but were determined to be.

"We'll catch you there too," Khayetsky swore, rolling the whites of his eyes. "And we won't forget anything. Not one thing!"

Before long they overtook the rest of the battalion. It had not descended yet, though the scouts reported that there were no signs of the enemy either in the nearest town or beyond. The troops were being fed. For the first time in three days they were eating properly, sitting on the green slope that only yesterday had been the enemy rear. They ate unhurriedly, and as the sun warmed them, they smiled as if they hadn't seen it for a long, long time.

Chernysh sat away from the rest, his chin in his hands. Gai's death had stunned him.

He thought of the night when Gai, risking his life, had gone instead of himself to find Buzko and Vakulenko among the corpses.... And of this morning, and the boy lying mangled in the grass with cornflowers in his hands.... It hurt past enduring.

In these few days of the assault Chernysh had got noticeably thinner, his brown boyish face was leaner, the high colour in his cheeks had darkened like an oak-leaf in autumn.

The sun was already well up in the sky; and on the plain below, a little town lay before them, bathed in its rays. Chernysh had seen this town plenty of times on Bryansky's topographical map. There it had been nothing but a lot of black rectangles—while when you actually saw it, what a pretty place it was. The wide streets running down to the dazzling sunlit river, the metal roofs sparkling among the foliage, and the walls white as cinema screens. But Chernysh knew there was nothing here but these bare walls and battered roofs.

Absorbed in his own thoughts, he did not notice Roman Blazhenko come up behind him. Roman stopped and looked down silently for a while at the little town.

"I wouldn't kill them," he said suddenly, and Chernysh, startled, looked round with dry, inflamed eyes.

"Wouldn't kill who?"

"All these Hitlers and Antonescus, these ministers that can't be happy without war.... Killing's too good for them. I'd put them in chains and take them around for people to look at.... No, let the little homeless kiddies take them around, the orphans that they've left everywhere. I'd have these little ones take them through every land, over every road.... And give them neither bread nor water.... Let them eat the cinders of our homes.... Let them gnaw at those sooty

bricks.... I'd burn them slow day after day, with the fire and metal they brought down on us. Give them such a taste of war that no one would ever want it again!..."

"We'll do that all right.... Stamp it out.... Like a plague!" Chernysh confirmed.

Blazhenko asked leave and sat down on the grass beside him. Looking down again and narrowing his eyes, so that his lined face looked older, he went on reproachfully.

"And even that isn't enough!... Here was Gai.... Such a good lad.... Young, and nice, and anxious to do right.... Did he live out his life? Didn't he want to see the sun any more? And look what they did to him." And Roman gave a deep sigh.

Then he happened to look up at Chernysh, and was horrified: the lieutenant was crying. He cried without knowing it, his eyes fixed on the empty green town with its white houses. If anyone had asked why he was crying, he couldn't have told them. There are these moments of pity for everything in the world. He thought of what Gai had said: "You feel sort of ... kindly towards everybody!"

Those were his first and last tears in the war. Recalling them later sometimes, Chernysh was ashamed of his softness; he did not know that this was the tender voice of his still uncalloused heart.

The order came to move on. The infantry companies were up in front, in close formation; then the Battalion Headquarters, then the mortars. On the way down, Bryansky and Sagaida argued about something, sliding over the lush grass. Bryansky's green canvas boots were completely faded now.

"They've forgotten everything already; Gai too," Chernysh thought; but he didn't blame them.

On the march a few days afterwards, when he had grown more intimate with Bryansky, he reminded him of

this episode. Bryansky made no reply for a few moments.

"You know, Chernysh," he said finally, "you know . . . I've seen things during this war that I imagine most people haven't seen; I've come to realize things that most people probably haven't realized either. And it's made me . . . if not wiser . . . at least different from what I was. . . ."

XII

The enemy fortified zones of Tirlul-Frumos and Jassy had been breached. The three hundred and fifty metal-and-concrete strong posts, that had seemed like an impenetrable barrier stretching from Pashkani to Jassy, had been left behind. Second Ukrainian shock troops poured into the breach. Pounding the enemy, decimating his reserves, they soon reached the town of Vâslui, captured it and pushed on rapidly southwards. The towns of Roman, Bacău, Byrlad and Hushi fell one after another. Second Ukrainian troops reached the Pruth in the Lopushnaya-Leusheni area and joined up with Third Ukrainian forces that had all these days been driving westward from the Bender bridgehead, along the famous Trajan's Wall, turning the flank of Hitler's Kishinev group from the south and southwest. By thus linking up, the two Ukrainian fronts sealed fast the ring around this Kishinev group. There followed a methodical, relentless compression of this huge ring, which enclosed, besides the Rumanians, fifteen German divisions of the *Südukraine* group of armies.

This was one of the brilliant operations of the war. By smashing blows delivered at a number of points, the trapped enemy force was sliced to pieces, and our troops went on to mop up the different sections, which were still alive—as a snake is alive for a time after it has been cut to pieces. And not a single regiment, not one com-

pany out of these encircled tens of thousands broke through that ring.

Day and night the guns roared at Ganceshti, at Minzir, at Hushi, at Bacău. The Red Army was wiping out the surrounded enemy divisions. It was a veritable new Cannæ staged by the generals of the Stalin school.

In the meantime, other forces of both these Ukrainian fronts were pushing a general offensive into the heart of Rumania. And in one of these advancing groups of the Second Ukrainian was the Guards Rifle Regiment of Lieutenant-Colonel Samiyev.

The troops streamed down from the mountains like a springtime torrent, flooding all the roads that led south and southwest into the Rumanian interior. There were already reports of the fall of Kishinev and Jassy, and of Rumania's surrender; but so far they were only rumours, the troops knew nothing for certain. They pushed on in forced marches, day and night, hardly stopping to rest. And it was queer to find parties of surrendered Rumanians tramping unescorted the other way, and nobody doing anything to them. Unless maybe some wag of a soldier called out:

"Oh, here comes *România mare!** What about it?"

Or else: "Run for your lives, Rumanies—take cover in that field."

While the Rumanians trudged on, making no reply to this banter, silent and secretly glad as they sweated under their round-bellied packs. You could tell that these were ploughmen and shepherds whom Antonescu had torn from their bits of land, selling them to Hitler to be slaughtered like a flock of sheep. They already saw themselves at home, and were hurrying there along the edge of the roads, leaving the middle to our columns.

Then Rumanians started appearing not only without

* The Greater Rumania.

escorts, but fully armed. Supply waggon came along, and artillery—the very artillery, perhaps, that a few days before had been shelling us from behind those pillboxes; now it moved in a submissive road column in the opposite direction.

Gradually the troops began to get hold of horses. Khayetsky made his appearance seated proudly in a cart with a canvas tilt, drawn by a sleek, glossy pair. Bryansky started upbraiding him, though the company did need a cart in the worst way. The men were sweating mercilessly under the heavy mortar parts.

“How can you say such a thing, Comrade Lieutenant?” Khayetsky protested, sincerely convinced he had done no wrong. “Me, loot? God forbid!... I was only taking my own back! Why, these are our horses—do you think I wouldn’t know them?... For two solid years I carted grain with them to the station!... This one’s called Vesjolaya and the other one’s Marina!”

“Why, that’s a stallion!” somebody laughed.

But Khayetsky was nothing put out.

“And who’s going to stop me calling a stallion Marina?... They’ve got my cow somewhere too, I’ll get that back as well!”

In the end Bryansky gave permission to dump the mortars in the cart. In the twinkling of an eye, the men were rid of their packs and the mortar parts were lying in the bottom of the vehicle, wrapped up carefully in hay.

“Ho!” Khayetsky shouted, his roguish eyes sparkling. “On to Bucharest, boys!”

Feeling the reins in sure hands, the horses arched their necks like a couple of swans.

Footsore from marching day and night, the men dreamed of getting horses to ride. And it so happened that Samiyev’s regiment ran into a Rumanian cavalry division, very grand with new harness. While the Headquarters clerks were puzzling how to document the trans-

fer of the Rumanians' transport to our forces (the act of Rumanian surrender provided for such a transfer), our footsloggers, grey with the dust of the road, flung themselves gleefully upon the flabbergasted cavalrymen. After all, they had a right to do it without all that red tape! How could they, worn out by the recent fighting and the nonstop march, pass by such an opportunity to get transport? The enemy was on the run, he had to be pursued. And here, going by on horseback, were the troops of yesterday's Nazi satellite.... Maybe these were the very horses that only a little while back had been trampling our fields beyond the Dniester?...

... Sagaida appeared posting on a horse's back, his black Cossack hat at a jaunty angle.

"What are you dawdling for?" he shouted hoarsely. "There won't be a damn thing left!"

And he vanished again. Chernysh saw Kazakov running past.

"Hullo, Lieutenant!" the sergeant called as he went. "Come on and get us horses!"

With Kazakov, Chernysh found himself in the very thick of the business.

The column of Rumanians stretched for a whole kilometre, they crowded with their horses along both sides of the road. Chernysh saw a soldier of ours seize a Rumanian trooper by the leg and try to pull him from his mount, while the Rumanian protested:

"But we've surrendered! We've surrendered!"

Kazakov dashed up, shoved the soldier aside and told the trooper.

"Get down! D'you think *you* are going to ride horses like that?"

In an instant, the Rumanian was on the ground and Kazakov in the saddle.

"It's fate itself that's sent them our way," he cried. "Haven't we earned it?"

Chernysh grabbed the first horse that came to hand.

"Get down!" he commanded, seizing the ornate bridle.

A dark young sergeant was in the saddle; he looked boldly at Chernysh, toying with his whip. "Looks rather like me," Chernysh found himself thinking. "Probably goes in for sports too."

"Get down!" he repeated.

Surprisingly, the sergeant replied in Russian.

"Can't without orders. We've surrendered!"

Chernysh thought: "He was in Odessa, most likely, if he talks Russian. And maybe it was he that killed Gai, planting that mine under the cornflowers!..."

Feeling his anger rising, he ordered again:

"Get down from there!"

"Your Honour!" the sergeant pleaded, but he jumped down all the same, and Chernysh slipped his foot into the stirrup. It reminded him of his happy boyhood days, of the steppes of Kazakhstan, where he'd ridden a little pony in his father's expedition....

Tearing towards him on a lathering cob came a capless infantryman with a wispy grey beard. He'd evidently never sat a horse in his life, and clung frantically with both hands to the mane; the snaffle was trailing on the ground, and the animal had broken it with his feet. Frothing and snorting, he was galloping at top speed, knowing that his rider couldn't control him.

"Stop him!" the infantryman cried desperately, pulling at the mane. "Stop him, somebody, for God's sake!"

Darting in and out among the carts was Makoveichik. He wanted something to load his reels of wire on, but couldn't make up his mind what would be best. At last his eyes fell on a yellow springcart. It was empty. He leapt in like a young tiger and snatched up the reins. The driver, having his dinner a little way off, ambled up with a spoon in his hand.

"You're welcome!" he told Makoveichik cheerfully, clearly pleased to be rid of it. Now he was certain to get out of this war business and go home. "You're welcome to it, comrade!"

He explained that he wanted to get his possessions out of the cart.

"Go ahead, take 'em! All I need's the horses!"

And Makoveichik started piling out the stuff himself: a blanket, a sack, a worn lambskin hat. Lying in the hay at the bottom were some apples, but the Rumanian wouldn't take them; he left them to Makoveichik as a token of good will.

The sun shone, the horses neighed; the Rumanians, rid of this bothersome nuisance, were cooking something merrily over smokeless fires. A cheerful hubbub filled the air, as if this were a fair; the blue sky rang; from the dry road, the dust swirled up. The bearded infantryman was charging down now from the other side.

"Stop him! Stop him!" he bellowed, hanging on for dear life, while the skirts of his overcoat flapped like two grey wings.

"Hold on!" the men replied, laughing, and no one did anything about it.

Within a few hours, they all had horses. The clerks were hastily documenting the transfer. Bryansky's company had a vehicle for each crew. In No. 3's crew, the elder Blazhenko took charge of the matter. He picked horses and cart with unhurried thoroughness: inspected the horses' hoofs, looked in their mouths; and when it came to the cart, walked round it several times with Denis, tapping the wheels:

"Will they last to Bucharest?"

The wheels rang sound. Still, after taking counsel together, the brothers got themselves a spare wheel as well and put it up on top.

"Because they say the road's all stony further along."

The whole highway was filled now with rumbling, creaking, the sound of horses' hoofs. Right on the go, the regiment formed up into a road column. Samiyev raced up and down on his motorcycle, looking the column over with an approving eye and giving orders to make sure nobody fell behind.

The irrepressible Khayelsky had to have his say here too.

"Now we'll catch up with 'em, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel. We'll get them, if we have to go to the end of the world."

The road clattered, the dust rose, enveloping the troops in a grey cloud. Only the riders' heads floated above it, bobbing rhythmically up and down. The highway wasn't wide enough to hold the surging stream, and many galloped over the crops at the side, shouting excitedly in the fever of the pursuit.

"Well, this is war, after all!" Chernysh cried, riding with his brother officers at the head of the company, and he cracked his whip, forgetting everything in the world.

XIII

They pressed on without pause for breath. Burst into undamaged, spick-and-span little towns. White flags hung from every balcony, every porch. Chernysh gazed with pride at these tokens of submission, a tribute to the Soviet Army's invincible might. The townsfolk crowded on the pavements, watching these strange troops that swept through the streets, full of seething, irresistible energy. Their skins roughened, their lips chapped by the dry winds of the South, the troops galloped over the asphalt without stopping even for a drink of water. For greeting their eyes on the walls of the houses was the huge letter "L," as tall as a man, and by its side a great

arrow, the breadth of your arm. Somebody had gone through here before them, somebody had already drawn that "L," and they had thought they were first. It seemed to spring up by itself, that "L," all along their route. And they rattled and rumbled through the paved streets, and out again into the steppes, and drove and drove their horses, possessed by the fury of the pursuit. The enemy retreated hastily, avoiding action, and that made them keener than ever, as the fresh tracks of game lure on the hunter.

Towards nightfall one day the misty outlines of mountains loomed ahead; they appeared quite suddenly over the blue horizon. The sun was setting behind them, shooting soft rosy arrows into the white cumulus, and these arrows too seemed to point the way of the advance, like immense natural roadmarkers. All night without a stop they sped towards those mountains. It was clear by now that the division was not heading for Bucharest, as the officers had believed, but had turned west, towards the Transylvanian Alps. They looked so close, those mountains—and yet the troops were riding another day, and then another night, before they began at last to enter the foothills.

Evening came, and with it a sudden chill, though in the daytime the heat had been intolerable. Sagaida handed over his horse to a soldier, climbed into a cart and was soon asleep. He liked to take a snooze, and never missed an opportunity if he could help it. And now too, though the cart bumped over stones and something hard kept knocking him on the head, he slept, and even had a dream. He dreamed that this was Samiyev pounding him on the head and telling him to throw out his Cossack hat. That red-topped hat had more than once got Sagaida into trouble with the C. O. Samiyev, who was an ardent votary of the infantry, could not stand "dandies," "imitation Cossacks," as he used to

call them—and Sagaida was an incurable “imitation Cossack.” He wore his Cossack hat all winter, letting his ears get frost-bitten, and in the heat of midsummer, sweating furiously; and he perched it as far back on his head as was humanly possible. The Old Man used to get seriously annoyed about it. Sagaida promised time and again to give up his precious hat, and could not bring himself to part with it.

“Where would I be without my red-topped hat?” he liked to sing in the dugout.

Shovkun dozed, swaying in the saddle. After the day’s heat and sweat, his back was feeling cold. He had given his groundsheet to Bryansky, saying he would put on his overcoat; but the coat was somewhere at the bottom of the cart, and there was no getting at it until they called a halt. And goodness only knew when that would be.

The road climbed up and up. It twisted and roared in the darkness ahead like an endless stream flowing uphill instead of down.

“That you, Shovkun?” somebody asked, riding up abreast of him.

Shovkun couldn’t tell by the voice who it was, for the fellow was hoarse; they had all gone hoarse here, as soon as they entered the mountains with their abrupt changes of temperature. After a good look, he recognized Roman Blazhenko. Roman was wearing a lambskin peasant hat like a helmet.

“I thought you were driving that cart of yours,” Shovkun said.

“I’ve switched with Denis; let him take a rest, he’s all jolted up from riding.”

“It does jolt you, being out of practice. . . . I see you’ve got yourself a hat?”

“Good hat, isn’t it? Khoma gave it to me. Can’t think where he gets them! Thought I’d better put away my

field cap, 'cause you doze as you jog along, it's liable to slip off."

"A lot of the fellows are without, they've lost 'em that way."

"Bumps you something fearful this road. Are these the Carpathians, d'you think, Shovkun?"

"No, it's the Alps."

"Alps, you say? Where are the Carpathians, then? Our father was killed in the Carpathians in the last war. . . . A neighbour that was with him says you can even see his grave up there."

"Where won't you see our graves? Our men have been all over, one time or another."

"Seems to be our fate always to be freeing and saving everybody."

"Well, the people around here can't do much for themselves, anyone can see that."

"Yes, they're a pretty poor lot. . . . Looks like Fritz is on the run good and proper—can't catch up with him even on horseback."

"He'll be making a stand in the mountains."

"There'll be more fighting to do."

"Aye, that there will. . . ."

The battalion commander came galloping past, and as he went, he plucked off Roman's lambskin hat and flung it away.

"Well, well," Roman said calmly, as if he'd been expecting it, and dug into his pocket for his cap.

"He's been pulling those hats off everybody," Shovkun grinned. "You'll find them in the ditch all along."

"But I only put it on at night. I know you mustn't in the daytime."

"All the same, Roman, I like you better in your cap. . . . You looked like a shepherd in that hat. And after all, say what you will, Europe's looking at us."

"That's so. It's taking stock of us, sizing us up.... What sort of soldiers has Stalin got, it wonders, what are they like?... You know, Shovkun, it's pretty cold up here...."

"I'm feeling chilly myself," said Shovkun.

But in spite of the bitter cold, he felt drowsier than ever. The warmth coming from the horse under him was comfortable and sleepy. The darkness pressed down as if the mountains themselves had closed over his head. He kept having a feeling that his horse was backing instead of moving forward. He would jerk up his head: "Whatever—?" But a minute later he would again be fancying that the horse was stepping backwards as if something had scared it.

There was a swift stream to be forded; then they came out again on the road. At midnight a wind sprang up. The pine trees whispered among the rocks.

"We must be pretty close to the enemy by now," Roman said, but Shovkun was snoring in the saddle and didn't hear.

Suddenly there was a glow ahead; and the higher they got, the wider it spread. At last they could see what it was: a bridge slung high over some mountain stream was ablaze. The flames flapped in the wind like the wings of an enormous scarlet bird. Sinister glints fell on the mountainside, on the pines, on the rocks. Before long, the glow lit up the faces of the troops, staring sombrely at the fire.

Orders were given to halt.

Sagaida woke because the cart pulled up and the iron leg of the bipod stopped thumping him on the head. If it had gone on thumping, he would have slept some more. Thrusting out his face from under his coat, he didn't know at first where he was. What were those gleaming rocks, and why were the pine trees singing?

"They've pinched my horse!" someone shouted close

by. "Cut clean through the reins! Left me with nothing, sure as I stand here!"

There was a sound of laughter, wisecracks, the clanging of billycans. Sagaida realized that he wasn't dreaming, that this was real after all. He climbed out of the cart, shivering all over. At the side of the road, two soldiers were shoeing a horse by torchlight. They were in a hurry and kept glancing over at the kitchen, afraid they wouldn't have time to eat. This happened at every halting-place—hungry as the men were, they first of all rushed to shoe the animals. The horses were casting their shoes all the time up here, and an unshod beast couldn't manage even ten miles over these stones. His rider had to take the pitifully foundering creature off the road, leave him there, and try to get himself another. And finding a horse in these mountains was no easy matter.

All along the road, campfires were blazing, and men danced around them to warm up. Some had pulled down their caps over their ears. By one of the fires Sagaida saw Bryansky and Chernysh; they were eating out of the same billycan and talking. The two had made friends on the march. Sagaida headed towards them, pulling his spoon out of his boot. As he came up, he heard Bryansky's soft velvety voice saying:

"... And the greatest beauty of all, in my opinion, is the beauty of constancy. Even if I had to stay at the front another twenty years, or thirty... be wounded another seven times... get old and grey... I'd still be true to her."

"The beauty of constancy again," Sagaida broke in, squatting down next to the billycan. "Why, you don't even know what she looks like any more.... It's a fairy tale you believe in! Haven't had a letter or a picture for nearly three years!"

"Yes, it's nearly three years," Bryansky assented,

but he didn't seem to pay any attention to Sagaida's words. He was in the mood when, after keeping things bottled up, a man suddenly needs to pour out his heart.

Horses snorted nearby as they chewed their oats; the crackling pinewood fire gave off a comforting warmth.

"We were in the same class in college," Bryansky went on, holding his hands to the flames. "Sat side by side for three years. We knew each other so well, used to read one another's thoughts like a book. Come to that, we didn't even have separate thoughts, but the same thought divided between the two of us. I could have translated every look of hers into words, and written it down, exact to the last comma. We didn't know what 'yours' and 'mine' meant, there was only 'ours.' And we knew it would be that way all our lives. . . . Pretty soon after the war started I got hit. They put me in a hospital near Smolensk, and she came over. That was the last time I ever saw her. The Germans captured Minsk soon after. . . . I did get a postcard; she was going East, didn't know where she'd end up. I remember her last words: 'If anything happened to you, Yuri, I could never, never be happy with anyone else. . . . I'd just stay by myself to the end of my days.'"

"And you believe it?" Sagaida interrupted.

"Yes, I do. I do, because I know it couldn't be any other way. It's not because I'm conceited. Of course, she may meet men who are better-looking than I am, or more capable. . . . But I'm convinced she can never find . . . another nature . . . just like mine. And it was just my particular kind of nature that she loved. There are thousands of different facets to every human nature. And only the two of us had all those thousands of facets, every last one of them, alike. I've seen plenty of girls since then, prettier than she is, real beauties, some of them, but none of them could compare with her. Not because she's the best in the world, of course. I'm no

idealist. But it's only a girl like her, neither worse nor better, that I'm capable of loving. For me she's the best there is. That's why I believe so utterly both in myself and in her. . . . And I'm glad I was born to such lifelong constancy. It makes me rich and strong. I always feel that I'm rich and strong. That's why I say the beauty of constancy is the greatest beauty of all. People who flit about, who squander away their emotions right and left, must in the end, I think, feel that they have nothing."

"All the same I'm convinced you've forgotten her," Sagaida kept on. "Do you think she's the same as three years ago? Why, even her looks must have changed! And you go on loving her just . . . out of a romantic chivalry. 'Your lady-love!' Actually, what you love in her by now is not herself at all, but your college days, your youth. It's all a dream!"

"All right, let it be a dream. But it's a dream that will light up my whole life."

"So you are an idealist, after all?" Chernysh asked with a smile.

"On this point, maybe I am."

"And if she still loves you," Sagaida went on, "that too is only as she imagines you, that's a dream as well. She sees a sort of visionary you as she stands there, making bombs for us somewhere out in Magnitogorsk or Chelyabinsk. Because you're not the same either as she knew and loved before the war. Say what you will, Yuri, you've become . . . something of the roughneck soldier . . . perhaps only a little less than the rest of us."

"There's something in that," Bryansky agreed thoughtfully. "Perhaps one isn't as sensitive as one used to be. . . . So many new habits and hard new passions one's developed in these years. They've burnt up a lot of things in you. But that's only made you . . . stronger."

Chernysh lay, his chin in his hands, looking at the fire. His eyes reflected the dancing flames.

"Stronger?" Sagaida muttered, scraping out the billy-can. "Stronger, eh? Good for you!"

"And think of what it's for!" Chernysh said dreamily. "For the finest aim there ever has been or can be!"

Bryansky wasn't listening. He sat with his white hands clasped over his faded boots, rocking evenly to and fro. In this posture he seemed like a child, there was something girlish about his sharply-raised shoulders with their neat, stiff straps. He stared in profound reverie into the fire, watching the green boughs being consumed and pitch oozing out of them.

"We give up everything for you, our country," he said suddenly in a queer voice. "Everything! Even our hearts. And whoever hasn't tasted of this joy, this . . . this beauty of constancy, hasn't really lived."

He went on rocking, gazing into the flames.

No one said anything.

By the next fire, Khoma Khayetsky, licking his spoon, was telling a group of soldiers with mock earnestness:

"... And I write back to her: 'Yavdoshka, my dear! I didn't get the letter where you asked for money....'"

The order came to move on, and they all got up again on their mounts. First thing, the stream had to be forded. Some of the horses shied, kicking up their traces and breaking them. The riders had to pull off their breeches, wade up to the armpits in the icy water, and drag the jibbing horses after them, like Volga boatmen of old towing a barge.

"That's how it is all the way," a soldier said, "horses helping men, men helping horses, and everybody pushing on together."

Jostling . . . shouting . . . cursing . . . the rumbling of carts—and again the black road up into the mountains . . . sparks flying under the hoofs . . . horseshoes clat-

tering. Behind them, the flames on the burning bridge leapt in the wind, and along the road the abandoned fires smouldered.

The cold night in these mountains, so far from home, made for intimacy. Even Bryansky, always so reserved, was confiding eagerly in the two men riding by his side. Chernysh hadn't imagined that Bryansky, who seemed so entirely absorbed in his formulas, in his command, in the fighting, had another side to him too. He had thought of him as a very capable officer, of course, but cold and rather pedantic. And perhaps it was only this night on the march that could have made Bryansky confidential. He evidently felt an urge to talk and talk about the faraway girl he loved, even if he spoke to the air, to the winds—as if he hoped she might hear him, wherever she was. There was a poetry about his unexpectedly fervent words.

"Wherever she may be, I'll find her! The war will be over some day, and I'll go back to her, I'll discover her! She loves Beethoven. She will play for me. And I'll listen, and remember this night in the mountains, and think about the '*Unsterbliche Geliebte*'...."

"What makes you so certain she's alive?" Sagaida asked. "Of course, I hope I'm wrong, but you know how they bombed the columns of evacuees. Or she may have got sick...."

"No, no, she's alive, I know she is! She's hard as diamond! Somewhere on the Volga, or in Siberia, or in the Urals!... Maybe she really is standing in a factory at this moment, machining bombs for us."

"Maybe she built a war factory out in the wilds of Central Asia," said Chernysh. "In biting winds and blizzards and bitter cold. And thought about you, Yuri!"

"And maybe right now, reading the communiqués, she wonders if I'm not up in these Alps...."

"Just listen to these two romantics!" Sagaida laughed

in the dark. "Go right on building your castles in the air, it's warmer that way."

Looking round, Chernysh saw the mountain road swarming with soldiers, the flame-lit river with the artillerymen taking the guns across, and the distance beyond, where the dark moving mass of troops vanished from sight. He had a feeling as if this live ribbon stretched right back to the frontier and beyond, over the roads of the home country, all the way to his mother's room. Perhaps she was sitting now in front of the wireless, with a shawl over her thin shoulders, waiting for his father to come home from the office, and listening to the news. And wanting so badly to hear about her Zhenya. But Zhenya had changed. He was Guards Junior Lieutenant Chernysh, a person his mother didn't know.

The burning bridge crashed into the water.

"We're burning the bridges behind us," Chernysh said.

"That's not us, it's the Fritzes," Sagaida retorted. "Fritz doesn't understand, he thinks we won't catch up to him without bridges. But Ivan will get through hell itself and come out on the other side. . . ."

Bryansky gazed intently ahead, at the narrow cleft of the road that the troops were entering.

"You can go up into these Alps only advancing," he said. "Retreating from here would be impossible. It would be the end of all of us. But then we've no intention of retreating," he laughed loudly, "and so we're pushing up and up into these stone catacombs."

Up at the head of the column the carts started clattering; the noise grew in volume, it was nearing every moment, and here the wheels were already rattling right in front of the three men, and their horses swung into a canter of their own accord. The rumbling filled the night, waking the sleeping mountains. . . .

XIV

The front shifted deeper and deeper into the Alps. A belt of mountain ridges began. The troops had already crossed several of these ridges. Dislodged from the heights, the enemy was rolling further and further back.

The column had halted for the day.

Chernysh and Bryansky were lying on the parched grass in a little garden. Bryansky had brought out some papers covered with diagrams and formulas, and was explaining them, pleased to see that Chernysh followed his meaning. Over their heads, a charred apple tree, black and leafless, flung out its gnarled boughs; it was queer to see the apples, baked and wrinkled, hanging on it like dainties on a New Year's tree.

A pile of cinders smouldered nearby, and only the chimney still erect among the ruins showed that yesterday this had been a human dwelling.

The past few days, enemy aircraft had plagued them without cease. They rained down bombs on the mountain roads and on the villages where the troops halted to rest. The roads and orchards bristled then with ack-ack barrels.

This was already the real Transylvania. The picture offered one of its typical contrasts: barren mountains on all sides, and here, in this little hollow, fertile orchards, gardens, vineyards. The village had been bombed the day before, and the ruins were still smoking.

"You should send these ideas of yours to the Department," Chernysh said. "I'm sure they'll take them into account when they draw up the new manual."

"I think," said Bryansky, "that I've put these observations fairly convincingly. With mathematical accuracy. After all, our mortars are a relatively new type of weapon, and so it's natural that their fire potentialities haven't yet been fully explored. The mortar has a big fu-

ture. Look at the *Katyushkas*. . . . And fire from a regiment's three mortar companies, laid down on the pattern I suggest, completely covers the enemy's trench and gives him no chance to look up. Not a single bomb is wasted. Our infantry could rush the forward defences right away! . . ."

Sagaida strolled up. At this bivouac today, the battalion had at last received several days' mail—fresh newspapers, magazines, half a sackful of letters. There had been nothing for Sagaida, and he evidently felt dispirited and restless. For want of anything else to do, he picked one of the baked apples and bit into it. He ate the soft, mushy thing like porridge, hardly chewing it at all.

"We had an old lady called Shurayikha living out at our edge of town," he began. "I remember, I'd be going with the fellows to a dance in the park, and there she would be, standing in the doorway and yelling: 'Oh, you good-for-nothing son of Sagaida's! . . . You're the one that killed my dog!' Still . . . she was a decent old stick. Wonder if she's alive? . . ."

Denis Blazhenko appeared from somewhere, clicked his heels smartly and asked permission to address the senior lieutenant. When it was granted, he reported briefly. As the senior lieutenant knew, his brother Roman, though wounded in the arm, had remained at his post and continued to perform his combat duties. For such conduct his brother Roman was entitled to a decoration—he, Denis, had inquired of the regimental political assistant, Guards Major Vorontsov.

"You're a bit late, Blazhenko. I've already recommended both Roman, and you, and many others. You go on doing your duty right and in time you'll have both the Valour Medal and the Order of Glory. I don't grudge a good soldier his due. You can go now."

"That fellow isn't losing any chances," Sagaida said,

when Denis had walked off after saluting in all due form.

"No, he isn't," Bryansky agreed, "but he's turning out a fine crew commander. Resolute, disciplined, and shoots better than the rest. . . ."

Bryansky didn't finish. There was a sudden droning in the sky somewhere quite close, just over the hill, and somebody cried.

"Aircraft! Aircraft!"

They sprang up and made for the nearest slit-trench, Bryansky stuffing the papers into his map-case as he went. Ack-ack guns spoke up in the orchards; the men hadn't even known they were there. Some of the troops headed for the mountains that sheered down around the village.

The sky was dropping down upon them, faster and faster, with an ear-splitting scream. Chernysh jumped into the slit on top of somebody.

The earth sundered and belched forth a leaping flame. Then everything seemed dark and the air tasted acrid.

"Don't let it get me, don't let it get me!" the "somebody" was muttering rapidly under Chernysh.

The ground shook, the explosions came closer and closer. A pair of frightened horses bolted driverless through the garden, the harness trailing after them. The shrieking sky was falling right onto that trench.

"Is it really coming—coming this way?" Chernysh thought feverishly. "Surely not. . . ."

There was a jolt, and something heavy tumbled down on him. Then he heard an explosion further off, and the next one further still.

Sagaida was the first to speak.

"Well, that's that," he said, shaking the earth from his clothes.

He helped Chernysh to free his legs, which had been buried under. The acrid smoke persisted. Khayetsky

climbed out of the bottom of the slit, picking bits of hay out of his whiskers.

"Khayetsky!" Chernysh called in surprise. "Was that you underneath me?"

"As you see, Comrade Lieutenant. Me it was."

"Then it was you muttering?"

"Well, maybe it was and maybe it wasn't, but anyway it's a good thing it didn't get us. Such sugar-plums those were, pelting down on us. My word!"

Shovkun came running up the garden, looking anxiously around. Sighting them, he called:

"Have you seen the senior lieutenant?"

"No," said Sagaida. "There was no seeing anything in that stew."

"Oh dear, oh dear!" With a gesture of despair, Shovkun was rushing on.

Khoma took pity on him.

"Here he is," he said.

The orderly stopped, heaved a visible sigh of relief, and walked up to the slit, a little put out at having shown he was worried.

"Everybody all right there?" Bryansky asked, clambering out.

"Our lot are. But No. 4 Company had a bit of bad luck. . . . There were two or three of them sitting under a cherry tree. . . . And it got them all."

"Look, it's on fire!" Khoma cried. "The Messer's on fire!"

They all looked where he was pointing. On one of the tallest mountains, an enemy plane was ablaze, spread out on the treetops like a black raven. A great pillar of smoke rose over it.

"A fine blaze," said Bryansky.

They squatted down on the grass and lit up. Even Chernysh did, just for company, and he felt his head swimming.

A soldier with a whip was running past, asking everybody as he went if they hadn't seen a pair of horses.

"Harnessed, were they?" Khayetsky asked.

"Yes."

"Sortels?"

"Yes, that's them!"

"Well then, we haven't seen 'em."

There was a general feeling of exhilaration, the way there is when everyone turns up safe and sound after the fighting is over. The smoke cleared gradually from the little hollow, so that the mountains seemed to be receding. By contrast with their gloomy grey, the clear blue of the sky was bluer still.

"And the size of the sunflowers here, my goodness!" Khayetsky was saying in his singsong. "As tall as my house!"

"Things ripen later here, though, even if it is the South," Shovkun remarked. "Look, it's August, and the oats are still practically green. And the plums too...."

Roman Blazhenko trotted up, panting and worried, and reported that five horses had been killed and his cart smashed to smithereens.

"And your horse was hit," he told Chernysh.

"Badly?" Chernysh asked abruptly, his face clouding over.

"Well..." Roman said uncertainly, "when the business started, he went just plain mad, broke loose and bolted into the road. All for galloping off, he was.... And that's where it caught him."

"Come and show me."

The two set off. Roman tried to comfort his chief:

"Don't take it to heart, Comrade Lieutenant. We'll get you another one."

The road was jammed with horses and the debris of carts. Chernysh recognized his horse a long way off. The creature was floundering in the ditch. He raised his head

with the white star on the forehead and tried to get up on his forelegs; but they wouldn't hold him, and he sank down again, gasping painfully. Where had he wanted to go? His breast had been blasted away.... He recognized Chernysh and stretched towards him, intelligent eyes fixed on his master.

"Your Honour!" Chernysh remembered the look of the young Rumanian who had ridden the animal before him.

"We've covered many a mile since then, old pal...." There was a gurgling in the horse's throat, as if more articulate sounds were struggling vainly for an outlet. "What are you trying to tell me, Old Faithful?..." Chernysh undid his holster, drew out the revolver and aimed straight at the animal's forehead, at that little white star....

XV

The next day Roman and Khoma did produce a horse for him from somewhere. It was small, but well-made and remarkably strong.

"It's ours, from back home," Khayetsky said, walking around it like a Gypsy horse-coper and smoothing the hair on its rump to cover up the brandmark.

The mountains proved a real test for the army horses. And though the men had seen plenty of horses captured from the enemy—German horses and French and Hungarian—they came to the conclusion that after all ours were the hardiest. Heavy dray horses and handsome trotters taken from the enemy lost flesh after a few hard marches, wasted before your eyes, and fell down at every mile. Whereas our horses would eat anything and were light and tireless... plodding on and on, day and night... climbing the steepest crags... everywhere serving the soldiers.

Khayetsky used to expatiate on the subject:

"Their horses can't hold a candle to ours! Why, they can't breathe properly, they've got too much fat around the heart!... A poor lot, like their masters! And look at our horses, now. They'll get through anywhere!..."

Chernysh's little mare had one fault: it had cast a shoe, worn its hoof sore, and limped on the off-fore. Maybe that's why Khoma and Roman had been able to get hold of it. They rushed to look for a shoe, but none fitted—they were all too large for the little creature. In general, horseshoes were worth their weight in gold up here. Whenever one came off and went clattering over the stones, several riders would leap down to get it. And small shoes for our Russian horses were rated particularly high, like revolver ammunition of the scarcest calibres.

Chernysh's horse could be shod only in a regular smithy. Bryansky's mount had also shaken his shoes a bit loose, and they needed tightening. The two men asked leave to stop in at the smithy in some nearby village. Their battalion commander was doubtful at first, but in the end he let them have their way. They promised to catch up with the column before dark and said they'd try to get hold of some wine.

The road spiralled down steeply into the valley, then up again over the slopes. And as far as the eye could reach, for miles and miles, troops were moving along it, raising clouds of brown dust.

In a wooded hollow on the left, quite a way from the road, Bryansky and Chernysh made out the roofs of a mountain hamlet. There must be a smithy there.

Just as they were turning onto the track that led to it, Kazakov overtook them. He was tearing down the road in a red fire engine with bells along the sides. With him were several more of the Headquarters scouts,

with tommy guns slung across their chests and their caps on one side. A little fellow in big green goggles was driving. The goggles, meant to save some fine European gentleman from getting crow's-feet, now protected this Soviet soldier against the sun and dust.

"We're off!" Kazakov called. "Got a job to do!"

The horses shied at the sight of the red vehicle that roared clanging past them. And down the road Samiyev stopped his motorbike, dismounted and held up his whip the way a traffic regulator holds up his little flag.

"They're going to catch it," said Bryansky. "He'll give them hell."

The two horses plodded ahead over the stony path, further and further into the woods. On the way there was a clear brook, gurgling over green, moss-grown stones. Chernysh stopped and got down to take a drink.

"Yuri!" he called, bending over the brook. "It's regular Narzan! . . . Try it!"

Bryansky dismounted too. It really was mineral water, with a pleasant tang that tickled their nostrils and brought tears into their eyes.

"Remember this place, Zhenya," Bryansky said. "We'll come here after the war to take the waters."

"If we live through it."

Bryansky didn't reply at first, then he said:

"When you're an old man, Zhenya . . . think of this place some day . . . where it was and who you were with. I like to feel that in many years' time somebody will think of me."

They filled up their bottles to give the battalion commander a drink of this water—why, it was as good as wine! Then they went on.

The mountains around seemed to be suspended in the air, there was a transparent, ethereal look about them in

these last days of summer. The woods seemed to let the light right through. The outline of every tree, every rock had an amazing distinctness, as if you were looking through binoculars: the pure mountain air has none of the mists that lessen visibility on lower ground. Some of the leaves were already turning the colours of autumn, giving a richer, more sumptuous look to the trees.

The faintest murmur, the flapping of a bird's wings, the pattering of the horses' hoofs reverberated up here with an extraordinary resonance, clear as a bell. The air, the mountains, the woods seemed to vibrate with every word you spoke, like one gigantic membrane.

At the edge of the village a crowd of children was waiting; they'd evidently sighted the riders a long way off.

"*Kovács? Kovács?*" they questioned eagerly. "*Van, van!*"*

They were obviously thrilled by the two officers' arrival and vied with one another in being of service to them.

Surrounded by the ragged youngsters, the two men rode up the narrow crooked street to where the children said the blacksmith was to be found. The villagers came out in whole families as they passed; the men lifted their crumpled hats, smiling women offered drinks of milk.

Clumsy black buffaloes chewed away stolidly, lying about in the mud.

On the way, the kiddies told them with cries and eloquent sign-language that some Russians had already been there, one of them was a jolly fellow called Ivan Nepytai; they too had shod their horses and then had gone away.

Beyond the village, at the foot of the hill, there was

* The Hungarian for "A blacksmith? We have one."

a suspension bridge with some trolleys on it; a narrow-gauge railway line ran between tall conical piles of broken stone, and around it stood some new wooden barracks. There was a quarry here.

Just as they were getting to the end of the street, Chernysh and Bryansky pulled up in surprise. What was this? From somewhere under the hill the sound of singing reached them—solemn, measured, powerful—as if it came out of a stone cave. They did not understand the words, but the tune was one familiar since childhood, since their Young Pioneer days. The “Internationale”!

The children stopped too and looked up at them, happy and proud: the “Internationale”!

They whipped up their horses and quickened the pace. The street ended, and they saw, flanked by sheds and storehouses, a small paved square before the quarry. There was a heap of charcoal outside one of the sheds, and tools, pieces of machinery and some scrap iron were scattered on the ground. Evidently this was the smithy—it belonged to the quarry. The smiths had lined up facing the wide-open smoke-blackened doors. There were a dozen or so of them, all hatless, in canvas aprons, with hammers in their hands. They it was that were singing the song of the proletariat.

One of them stepped forward as the two officers rode up, and bowed solemnly.

“Good day, comrade!” he said in Russian to each in turn.

The two men were surprised and touched by this unexpected ceremonial reception. The blacksmith, in the meantime, was explaining in a soft Ukrainian patter that he himself hailed from Bukovina, but was working here at the quarries of Baron Streich. His fellow workers would have wished to give the Soviet officers a fitting reception, but they were poor, they had nothing but their children, and they had decided to greet Stalin’s soldiers

with the "Internationale." The Germans had taken away their young people to work on fortifications. The Germans had taken away all animals that they hadn't been quick enough to hide in the mountains. But the Germans had not been able to rob them of the "Internationale."

Bryansky and Chernysh, very much moved, jumped down and shook the blacksmiths' hands. The smiths surrounded the horses, lifted up their feet and inspected the hoofs. The flames roared in the forge.

Chernysh's lame little mare made a special appeal to them all. Sturdy, quiet, with a big tuft of hair on its forehead, it let the children play with it and climb under its belly, and picked up titbits neatly from their hands. They gave it nut-kernels, peaches, grapes, and it ate them all.

"Russian horse!" the children shouted, delighted that it was so small and ate everything. "Russian horse! *Jo! Jo!*"*

The blacksmiths got busy shoeing it, and they would not let Chernysh or Bryansky help.

The Bukovinian who acted as interpreter declared that now they would get a lot of small shoes ready specially for the Russian horses. They'd shoe the horses so soundly, he said, that they might take the soldiers up to the highest ridges of the Alps.

Soon the whole square before the quarry was crowded with villagers—men, women, old people, children. There were Hungarian and Rumanian families here, and a few Ukrainian families from Bukovina. All of them had been working in the quarry for years. There were also some refugees, mostly young girls from Alba Julia, Sibiu and other towns. Some of the girls, nothing constrained by the old people's presence, walked up to

* Good.

Chernysh and Bryansky, looked them boldly up and down and patted their cheeks approvingly: *Jo!* Everybody laughed and no one minded the girls' liberties, which made both officers flush uncomfortably. They weren't used to such endearments, and in public, too.

The womenfolk brought them fruit, milk and goat's cheese, but Bryansky and Chernysh ate only the fruit.

"Not poisoned," the women assured them, tasting the food first. "For the Germans—poisoned, but for Russians—not poisoned."

They all complained of Baron Streich. When Bryansky said that the Baron wouldn't come back any more, that they'd have a new democratic way of things, everyone rushed to shake hands with him, and the children whistled saucily at the mountains, as if the Baron were still there.

A young Gypsy was very anxious to tell Chernysh's fortune; she'd do it for nothing, she said. Chernysh laughed.

"We don't need our fortunes told. We know what's ahead of us without it."

Through with the shoeing, the blacksmiths tied several spare shoes to each of the saddles. They wouldn't take any payment, only asked for the stars off the two officers' caps.

"We've shod them well, with right good will," the Bukovinian assured them at parting. "May the shoes never wear out, may your horses never founder!"

"They'll ring over all Europe, those shoes!" Bryansky replied, swinging himself into the saddle.

When they had gone a little way down the cobbled street, the stately melody sounded behind them once more. The workers were singing their anthem to speed their liberators on their long and noble mission. Girls'

and children's voices wove into the men's chorus now, like coloured silken threads.

The song swelled and swelled. The evening sky, the woods, the mountainsides gave it back; and for a long time after, it rang, echoing, in the clear, still air.

XVI

The mountain was so steep that it took them all day to descend it. You had to jam on both brakes together, and the wheels got fire-hot on the stones. Then they were climbing again practically all night.

Past midnight the column stopped suddenly. The drivers shoved stones under the rear wheels, to keep the carts from slipping back and to give the horses a rest. They carried these stones around with them, so they wouldn't have to look for them in the dark when the necessity arose. Now they were waiting for the order to feed the animals, but the order didn't come. Instead came another, passed down from man to man:

"Company commanders to the head of the column!"

This sounded like an alarm. The officers darted ahead, straightening their blouses as they went. Before long, they came back, and the column started to break up rapidly. The vehicles were taken off the road and sheltered among the pines. For the present they had to stay put. Only a very few men were left with them, one for every so many carts. The rest, grim and intent and businesslike, were packing the horses, providing themselves with ropes, getting water-bottles issued them if they didn't have any. From up the mountainside came a few desultory machine-gun bursts, as if somebody were firing up at the sky.

In the meantime the scouts were bringing in more reports. Up there, on one of the highest saddles, the enemy was sitting tight. He'd turned a small mountain

village into a regular strong point. The road in front of the village was blocked with barricades of oak-logs and pitted with tank traps. Cutting across it were several tiers of trenches, blockhouses and open gun pits and around the foot of the hill was a solid wall of barbed wire. A frontal assault was out of the question. It would have been far too costly, and there was no guarantee of success. Samiyev sent mounted patrols far out to the right and left to sound out the enemy's defences and fire system.

The patrols came back at dawn. Their reports were pretty much what he had expected. There weren't even any footpaths out there, let alone any roads. On dominant spurs a little way off the road, the Germans had only single machine guns; and further out still, there didn't seem to be a soul. Nothing but impenetrable thickets and sheer cliffs. The enemy was certain that they gave him secure protection, that here nobody would be able to get through. But Samiyev sent out the patrols again; they'd got to find passages, he told them. For both he and Vorontsov had reached the same conclusion: the height would have to be won out there, in the impassable forest, among the unscalable cliffs, where the enemy didn't expect them. They would have to cross this ridge somewhere out at the side and take the enemy in the rear.

At noon the patrols returned. The fresh reports they brought confirmed the results of the night's reconnaissance: far out to the side the terrain was so impassable that the enemy had not troubled to post even isolated pickets.

Samiyev and his chief-of-staff sat down to work out a detailed plan.

Vorontsov called together the Communists and Kom-somols. The regiment would have to make its way ahead in isolated parties and small groups and might

for a time have to operate without centralized direction. In these independent groups, the Communists and Kom-somols had a particularly important and vital part to play. In general, the individual soldier's role was much greater in the mountains than in open country. Here success depended on the enterprise, resourcefulness, fighting spirit of every man. Vorontsov, well aware of it, saw to it that there should be some Communists in each party that was to act independently. It was the Communists that had to set the tone; they must keep the morale at a high level all the time.

It was an unusual meeting. People came to it in full marching order, hung with grenades and ammunition drums, with their tommy guns across their chests. They didn't elect any chairman or secretary, didn't take any minutes, didn't draw up any resolutions. There was no time for it—the advance was to start right away.

Some squatted down on tree stumps and roots, others listened on their feet. Vorontsov walked up and down among them as he talked. The fallen leaves rustled under his worn boots. He spoke quietly, without raising his voice, yet each of them heard every word.

"We're switching to new tactics," he said. "Up to now we've been fighting on the plain, in steppes, forests and marshes. Now we're going to be fighting in the mountains, and mostly not in the daytime, but at night. The objective is to seize the roads, the passes. As you can see, mountain warfare is above all a war for roads. But we in the infantry, and particularly we Guards, can't tie ourselves down to the roads. We must be able to manoeuvre effectively in any kind of broken country. Then these bare crags, these impenetrable jungles, will be friends, not foes. The Germans think these obstacles insurmountable—but we're going to surmount them all the same. The Germans are afraid of them—and we're

going to conquer them. Because our tactics—the Stalin tactics—are bolder, more flexible, more up-to-date than the Germans' are."

Chernysh listened without taking his eyes off Vorontsov. He hadn't seen him since that time in the dugout before the line of pillboxes, when Vorontsov was down with malaria. The major had only recovered recently. His face was still pale and drawn. Again Chernysh felt something non-military about him, reminding him of his father. The husky voice . . . the short padded jacket, with the blouse looking out underneath. . . . the slight stoop. . . .

It was a riddle to many people how this homely major, who talked as quietly as a village schoolmaster, clearing his throat from time to time, could exercise such influence over the troops. No one had ever heard him shout or fuss. He did everything just as he talked, calmly, evenly, his grey eyes under their shaggy brows now searching, now kindly. And everybody did what he said, his orders were obeyed as punctiliously as the C. O.'s. The men loved him.

"It's on us more than anybody else that winning this action depends," he said, every word distinct. "We Communists and Komsomols must be fully aware where our place is, both on the road and now in this night fighting. Our place is up in front. In the night our voice must always sound in the van of the rest. The men believe in us, they follow us into action."

"We'll do it!" Chernysh felt like shouting. "We'll do it."

Filled tommy-gun magazines peeped out of the tops of both Vorontsov's boots.

"We won't take fright either at mountains without road or track or at thickets where the foot of man has perhaps never trod. We shall pass here because we are Bolsheviks. Keep reminding the men of what Suvorov

used to say: 'Where the deer can make his way, so can our soldier. And where even the deer cannot, our soldier will.'

XVII

The plan of the operation and the routes of the different parties and groups had been worked out to the last detail. Only if each party did its job exactly could the whole undertaking succeed. So even the staff officers went along. They were to act as "navigators," for it was easy to lose your way in these gorges, particularly at night.

The first battalion stayed where it was to attack the pass frontally. The second battalion went off into the mountains to the left. The third—into the mountains to the right. In the next twenty-four hours they had to cross the ridge, and by the following evening they were to come out on both sides in the Germans' rear and straddle the highway unperceived. The assault was to start the following night when a green rocket was fired.

Bryansky's mortar company also split up, its different platoons being attached to the various infantry companies. Chernysh's platoon was going into the enemy rear with the second battalion; picking a position on some dominant elevation, it was to act in conjunction with the machine gunners, raking the road behind the enemy lines and the mouth of the pass.

The second battalion set out after dinner. For several hours they moved along the bottom of a gorge, penetrating deeper and deeper into the woods. After them they led their horses, packed with mortar-parts, ammunition, and water-containers. In front of the mortarmen was a Headquarters tommy-gun platoon and No. 4 Rifle Company. Besides the battalion commander, Major Voron-

Isov was with them too, a tommy gun on his back and some rolled-up newspapers protruding from his pocket. Every once in a while he would turn his head to take a look at the men, who trudged after him, single file, rustling over the leaves. There were few of them. There were always few of them when they were on the march—but when the fighting began and they scattered and started shooting, their number seemed to multiply many times over.

The forest was getting denser all the time. The ancient trees interlaced overhead and the sunlight could not penetrate. The air was saturated with a moisture that never dried. The stones, covered with a thick layer of decayed leaves, felt soft like cushions, and gave under your feet. Snakes wound rustling in and out among the leaves, and hedgehogs stirred.

Often the way was barred by great trees that some storm had felled. The men hopped over them like squirrels, but the horses with their burden had a hard time of it. Some got their hoofs stuck and broke their legs in the effort to extricate them. They had to be abandoned, and their load distributed among the men.

As they went along, the party blazed a trail on the tree trunks for the runners to follow. They would tear away the moss and cut an "L" in the bark underneath.

"'L', 'L'!" Khayetsky cried out, expansive as usual. "Wherever we go, you follow us! . . . You'll be everywhere yet—up on top, and down below, and all over! . . ."

Like a chain of eternal landmarks, they left that letter behind them in this forest jungle of a strange land. The first letter of Lenin's immortal name. As if the great leader's spirit were hovering over them, were with them constantly.

Soon they had to part with the last horses. A sheer cliff rose before them. Chernysh gave orders to unpack the animals, and sent two men back with them. The

water from the containers they poured into their bottles, and what was left over they drank.

Now came a long and stubborn assault on that granite wall. Chernysh was first to go up. He pulled off his boots, tied a rope around his waist and started the ascent.

There had been a time when he had climbed the Pamirs, never thinking of war. He loved the sport, the sunlight, the gleaming silvery summits. But his country had taught him to scale the tallest peaks not only for sport's sake.... And now he was grateful to it for the fact.

"You say you've done mountain-climbing," Vorontsov had said; he still remembered their talk in the dug-out. "You see, it's coming in handy now."

His head thrown back, the major watched Chernysh's cautious, sure-footed upward progress. Occasionally Chernysh paused to rest, clinging to the cliff with his hands and feet. Barefoot, without belt or cap, he did not look like a soldier at all.

Vorontsov thought of a picture he'd seen somewhere: the Nazis shooting a group of Komsomols. One of the Komsomols, with his air of imperious youth, had something in common with this junior lieutenant.

Flinging back his dark head, Chernysh would study the nearest projection that he could fasten upon to pull himself up. Then he would seize it in an iron grip.

He was already some twenty metres up, and still the face of the cliff rose vertical above him, sheer as a skyscraper. Down below, the men followed every movement with bated breath. They had made a tall pile of brushwood, groundsheets and padded jackets, in case he should miss his footing.

"It wouldn't help much," thought Khayetsky, looking at this green pallet prepared for his lieutenant.

"Hold on!" Vorontsov ordered abruptly, catching an incautious movement of Chernysh's. The major's face turned hard as stone with tension. "Take a rest!"

And Chernysh, obeying orders even up there, did take a rest, at the same time inspecting the cliff face above him, studying it carefully inch by inch. He did not look down once. He reminded one from below of a great green bird with a black head, that had dug its claws into the granite and hung there, outspread against it.

"What a hold he's got!" Khayetsky marvelled, looking up fearfully at that dizzy skyscraper and shuddering at the thought that he would have to climb it too.

The sun was setting already, there were dark shadows under the cliff, and still Chernysh had not reached the top. The slender twenty-five metre rope tied about his waist gave out, and they fastened on to it another just as long. Khayetsky made a tremendous stir about it.

"Here, fix on the tail quick. Else he's liable to get up there and fly off, and what would we do then?"

"Oh, we'd send you to climb it, Khoma!"

"Think I wouldn't?"

"With your tongue, you mean? ... Good thing it's so long—you won't need any rope!"

"There! It's done!" Chernysh called down triumphantly. "The job's done, Comrade Major!" he reported at the top of his voice, so that even the patrols out at the sides heard him and felt thrilled.

They saw him step onto what was apparently a broad ledge slanting up the cliff and walk rapidly up and up it until he set his bare feet on the very top. His shirt fluttered in the wind and the crimson sunset lapped his whole figure. While down below it was ever so still, not a breath of wind anywhere, and the sun had long been down.

"What d'you see there, Comrade Lieutenant?" Khayetsky called, his black whiskers thrust upwards.

"This way I see Moscow, and over there I can see Berlin!"

"Who's next?" asked Vorontsov, and every man felt as if those keen grey eyes were fixed on him alone.

"Me, Comrade Major!"

"Me! Me!"

"Have we got any more mountain-climbers?"

"Yes," Denis Blazhenko replied gruffly, stepping up to the dangling rope.

His fellow villagers stared. A mountain-climber? Denis Blazhenko a mountain-climber? Why, he didn't even know what one looked like! He'd never climbed anything higher than his barn at home.

"And what ascents have you made?" Vorontsov inquired politely, but Denis already had the rope fastened round him. "Kazbek? Or Elbruz?"

"I'd tell you what he's climbed, Comrade Major," Khoma had to put in, "only it wouldn't be healthy. He's very strict, our corporal is!"

But he did say something quietly to the men just around him, and they burst out snickering.

"I'm ready!" Denis shouted up and started climbing, like an unshod horse on ice.

Chernysh, standing away from the edge, tugged at the rope, pressing with his knees against a boulder. The wind ruffled his long lock of hair.

When all the men were up on top, and had pulled up the equipment too, Khoma at last got ready to follow.

"Hurry up!" they all yelled, as one does to the last man, while he took no notice, but tied the rope good and fast, to make sure he didn't fall. The others had the laugh on him, though, for they all grabbed hold and pulled at the rope together, jerking him up like a bucket of water. Khoma barely had time to shift his hands and

feet and get his head out of the way, so as not to bump it on the cliff.

"Go easy on a fellow!" he implored. "Have a heart!"

But once up on top, he looked around at the transparent blue of the evening and threw up his arms in wonder.

"My word! Look at the size of this! Mountains and mountains without end! Everything's so big, you feel as if you're getting bigger yourself! . . . I wish my Yavdoshka could get up on tiptoe and see me now! . . . Oh-ho! . . . She wouldn't know her Khoma if she saw him climbing up to the sky. 'That's not my Khoma!' she'd say."

He undid the rope and, winding it round his hand, chanted in his Podolya fashion:

"Good old rope, a real brother you are! We wouldn't leave you anywhere, no, indeed; you'll go with us wherever we may go! Sure, you're only made of hemp, but more precious to us than if you were pure gold! The link between us all, that's what you are, brother! As long as we all hold on to you, nothing has any terrors for us. If one man climbs a rock with you, he'll pull up all the rest after him! If one man slips, we'll all hold him up, won't let him come to grief! Let's hold on to our rope, then, brother Slavs!"

"Brother Slavs" had come to be a favourite expression with the men when they were feeling good. Just now the "brother Slavs" were shouldering the mortar-parts.

"It looks as if you're turning mountain-climber too," said Vorontsov, who had listened with a smile to Khoma's oration.

"I am, Comrade Major, I am indeed! . . . Might I take a light from you? I thank you! . . . It's a wonderful thing what a little exercise does for a man. Down below, you had one Khoma. But now, after this bit of climbing, I'm

quite a different Khoma. I can see further, and hear better, and my headpiece seems to work quicker, and I feel a better sort of fellow. Yes, I'm pretty sure I'm going in for mountain-climbing."

"We've been mountain-climbers for a long time now, Comrade Khayetsky," Vorontsov said, walking by his side. "We've been mountain-climbers ever since Suvorov's day."

And clambering with the men from stone to stone, the major started telling the story of Devil's Bridge.

Chernysh, looking across at him occasionally, was amazed at the change in him. Only this morning, at the Party and Komsomol meeting, he had looked pale and wan; yet now he was treading over the sharp stones and keeping his balance easily, like a young man. In the blue twilight, his face looked finely chiselled. He told the men things that had happened at various times, and they all tried to keep up and stay close to him so as not to miss anything. During the brief rest stops, they squatted down on the cold stones, but the major stayed on his feet, strolling about among them. He seemed tireless—they didn't know that if he once sat down, he'd have a hard job getting up again on his rheumatic legs.

It was light, the night over the mountains was a limpid blue, transparent as a gem of the purest water. Stars twinkled in the tall vault of the sky; occasionally one would fall, as if somebody were firing signal rockets up there. The water bottles and ammunition drums on the men's belts clinked in time with their steps. Their boots rang over ancient stones that no one had ever walked on before.

"Where even the deer cannot make his way...."

XVIII

Sergeant Kazakov was out with a reconnoitring party ahead of the 3rd Battalion which Samiyev himself was leading. This battalion was skirting the pass on the right.

Fir trees, slight as adolescents, dotted the barren mountainside. The men pushed forward through prickly gorse along the bottom of the ravine, between great rocks weighing thousands of tons. Nearly all of them were scratched, bleeding, lattered by now. Even on Samiyev's close-shaven brown cheek there was a scratch crusted over with a dark, dry scab. Up in front with the battalion commander, he would stop every now and again and look on his map for some hut that perched like a swallow's nest on one of the mountain spurs. He would study the map, biting his full lip, then slam the map-case shut, swearing: the swallow's nest wasn't marked—some romantic of a forester had put it up since the map was printed.

"Forward march!" he would order in his Tajik accent and push on. He certainly wasn't going to stop because the map of Central Europe was out of date!

Kazakov left markers along the way, and climbed higher and higher, compass in hand, on the azimuth he'd been assigned. He had a good bump of locality and went ahead confidently among these ancient grey tiers of stone, as if he had been here before.

Like the rest of the battalion, the scouts had to go slow, taking cover all the time and crawling a good deal of the way, because the enemy might spot them from the crest of the ridge.

Some twelve kilometres from the road, amid a chaos of wild rocks and crags where there surely could not be a single human being, a machine gun spoke up suddenly above them. Kazakov signalled to the others to

lie down and flattened on the ground himself, eyes intent on the cliff from which the fire had come. It reminded one of a mediaeval castle—a gloomy citadel, tapering to a spire on top. It was up on this spire that the machine gun was posted.

Kazakov sent a messenger back to warn the Old Man that they'd run into an enemy fire-point.

"Tell him we'll have it cleaned up in the next hour," he said, "and in the meantime they can stop for a smoke and a drink of water if they've got any."

Have it cleaned up. . . . It was easily said—but the thing still had to be done. If there was one thing the Old Man didn't like, it was empty talk. Kazakov made his decision. Since the party had been spotted anyway, let the boys feint preparations for a frontal assault. The Fritzes would be taken up with these "play-actors," and in the meantime he would squirm along to the foot of the hill, climb the rear slope and wipe them out with grenades. He didn't give the job to any of the others; no, he would do it himself. Not that he didn't trust them; he had known them for a long time now, and relied on them as he did on his own self. Simply, this was a job after his very heart. He quivered with excitement whenever there was a chance to bring his ingenuity, his skill, his dashing bravery into play, when there was scope for his talents, mental and physical. And by his right as commander, he always kept the most dangerous jobs for himself, never pausing to consider that in the end it might cost him his life.

"You take advantage of your sergeant's stripes, you ginger devil," the others would reproach him. "Always grabbing all that's hottest for yourself!"

"Oh, I let Kazakov have it because he's a pal of mine," the sergeant would grin back.

The party started their "play-acting," and it promptly brought some short bursts from the cliff.

Kazakov crawled off between the stones; he was barely noticeable in his khaki, like a steppe lizard.

The others went on baiting the machine gun.

Again it fired a few rounds, but the bullets whizzed past in the clear, dry air, high over their heads.

"What the hell?" the men wondered. "They're shooting over us instead of at us!"

"Maybe we're on dead ground here?"

"Oh no, we're not. Look!..."

They made a rough estimate of the angle. Certainly the bullets could have hit them.

Kazakov crawled without pause. During tactical drill the officers could never make him crawl right, no matter how they tried; now he was crawling as if he'd been doing it all his life. He got up only at the very foot of the cliff, where he couldn't be seen from above. His elbows, rubbed sore on the stones, were itching. When the regiment, sent back to rest, was stationed near the divisional laundry with its girls, the elbows of Kazakov's blouse were always neatly darned; his boots used to shine then, and his big flame-coloured head reeked with the choicest perfumes of Europe.... But when the regiment went into action, or the Old Man sent him out night after night to haul in a prisoner, and no prisoner was to be had, the sergeant had no use for girls or for outward smartness. He'd go around moodily, as if he had a hangover, only his eyelids twitching nervously. They'd tell him he might at least wash his face and comb his hair; but even that was too much of an effort, and he just laughed them off. That was the state he was in now. Again his undershirt had crept up and was hanging out behind. His ungreased boots had cracked. A growth of red beard showed on his bony chin. He'd forgotten all about the laundry and had no attention or interest for anything but the job in hand. At moments like these, his whole being was focussed in his greenish, slightly

slanting eyes and big ears. He stood listening, head cocked on one side and mouth slightly open. Thousands of plans and schemes flitted and hovered in his crafty eyes.

He clambered up the hill, grasping the prickly shrubs in his rough, freckled hands. Big, reliable hands that the girls liked so much. . . . He'd look round, listen, and move on again among the stones, his whole body tensed like one flexible muscle.

There wasn't a single path around here.

Who was up there on top? How many of them were there? These queries did not frighten Kazakov, they only made him keener. He couldn't wait to be up there and get to grips with them.

Mountain eagles circled high in the azure sky.

"Not even our birds have ever come this far, I suppose," Kazakov thought to himself. "And we have."

Here at last was the top. It was a fair-sized patch of ground, littered haphazardly with rocks, though from below it had appeared the point of a spire. Grenade in hand, he crept in the direction of the brief occasional machine-gun bursts.

"Why shouldn't I take them alive?" he thought suddenly. "I will! The Old Man'll be pleased!"

He hitched the grenade back on his belt and held his tommy gun at the ready.

What he saw when he stopped behind the last rock surprised him intensely. Lying at the machine gun on the edge of the cliff was one single soldier in a brown Hungarian uniform, but minus his boots. Scattered around him were cartons of ammunition, empty cartridge cases, an open water bottle. Nobody and nothing else. The soldier was gazing down intently, unaware that somebody had come up behind.

"Where are his boots?" Kazakov wondered, and, pointing his tommy gun at the fellow, he said casually, with deliberate nonchalance:

"Hände hoch!"

The soldier turned to face him. It was the face of a corpse, the face of a mummy that had lain for centuries in its tomb—withered, brownish-yellow, with eyes sunken deep into their sockets. Only the eyes were still alive, and they lit up with such amazement, mingled with such wild joy, that Kazakov felt sorry for his prisoner.

"Hände hoch!" he said again, just as if he were offering a pal a cigarette.

The soldier sat up and raised his hands. Only now did Kazakov understand why he was barefoot. Both his feet were chained to the rock.

"He's one of these 'death-candidates!'" he thought in a flash of realization. "That's what he is."

He had heard many times about these "death-candidates," whom the enemy left behind when he retreated.

"Kamerad, don't shoot!" the soldier said, looking at him with fear, but no malice. "I'm a Croat, *Kamerad*."

In a dry, cracked voice, he chanted some smutty ditty in Croatian to convince this big fellow with the tommy gun that he really was a Croat. His lips were so dry that they looked like a crust of black bread, and he could barely force them apart. Kazakov unhitched his water bottle, and though there was only one gulp left in it and his own throat was dry, he handed it to the soldier without thinking twice.

"Here, have a drink."

The Croat seized the bottle greedily. His hands, wasted like an old man's, shook as he drank, and even the greying hair on his head trembled. He thanked Kazakov in different languages as he gave back the bottle:

"Keszennem szépen, spasibo, merci. I'll never forget this!"

Still agitated and confused, mixing Hungarian and Croatian words, he started telling his story. He was a Hungarian-Croat from around Balaton, a cobbler by

trade. When Szálasi drafted him to the army as cannon-fodder for the Germans, he would not shoot at his eastern brother Slavs and decided to give himself up. One night he tied a white handkerchief to his rifle and went off into the mountains. All night he roamed in that wild maze of stone, without a compass, with the white handkerchief on his rifle. At dawn he thought he had reached his goal. Some little mortars were coughing on the cliff above him, and he called out and waved his white flag. They came down to him quick from there—Germans and Hungarians. After wandering all night in the Alps—those cruel Alps!—he had again landed in their lines. They guessed right away what he was up to. Took him to Battalion Headquarters. The officers there taunted him endlessly with his unsuccessful attempt to surrender, kicked him around; then they were going to shoot him. But men were scarce, and somebody suggested leaving him as a picket on the far outside wing. That meant certain death. They chained him to that cliff beside a machine gun, left him plenty of ammunition. Now they knew he would fire to the last cartridge when he was attacked. And he had to fire. It was his only hope, chained there to that Alpine cliff, because only by firing could he give a sign that he was there, that he existed, lived. He was doomed to death, without bread or water, on those hot rocks. For who would have heard his groans amid these stony wastes? Who would have thought of looking for a living human being here, at the edge of the world? Only that the hungry eagles might come to peck out his eyes.

Kazakov visualized how in a month's time a blackened body, a dry skeleton would have lain there, chained to a silent machine gun rusted with the rain. It felt good to be saving a man! How much better than killing!

As he told his story, the Croat kept putting out his hand to touch Kazakov. As if he still couldn't believe that

this was a live Soviet soldier before him, in a faded cap, with a tommy gun slung on his chest. Halfway through his narrative he stopped short, gazing spellbound at the Order of Glory on Kazakov's greasy blouse.

"Kremlin?" he asked, pointing to the outline of the Spassky Tower in the middle of it.

"Yes."

"It is strength. It is history."

Kazakov got up, walked over to the massive machine gun and grasped the warm barrel with both hands.

"I'll have you out of those irons in a moment, brother! . . ."

Eagles called, soaring over the deep gorges.

XIX

At midnight, when Samiyev fired six green flares one after another, the Germans and Hungarians holding the pass had no suspicion of how near they were to their end. The sentries stared, puzzled, at the flares scattering in cold green sparks over their heads. How could they know that two Soviet battalions were lying along the road in their rear, waiting for these green lights?

Now the lights had come, and the troops got going. The silence cracked up, harsh noises filled the night, thousands of lights from tracer bullets sped through the dark to the mouth of the pass.

Previous battles for heights had shown Samiyev that as a rule a certain amount of time elapses between the fighting at the foot and at the top. That gives the enemy a chance to recover and muster his strength. Samiyev was determined it shouldn't happen this time, and he had disposed his forces and fire-power accordingly. The two battalions in the Germans' rear were lying above the pass, on the cliffs overhanging the road. At the signal, their

mortars and machine guns fired down almost vertically into the enemy defences.

The 1st Battalion, for its part, lay in a half-moon below the pass, so that the Germans were silhouetted against the sky. The mouth of the pass was under cross-fire from above and below. Samiyev had gained a special advantage by starting the action in the dark. Stunned by the sudden blow, the enemy rushed to the telephones, but the connections had already been cut.

In the meantime the 1st Battalion's assault parties had blazed lanes in the wire with grenades. The shouts of "hurrah" sounded higher and higher up, closing in on the crest. Overwhelmed by the daring night attack, the enemy got no chance to put up a resistance. It was one of the regiment's briefest and most brilliant actions in the mountains. An action won practically without losses. For quite a while after, Samiyev, talking to the general, was pretty proud of his cleverly executed night operation.

By morning, the road had been cleared of its barricades, and the anti-tank ditch filled in so that the vehicles could cross it. The iron-rimmed wheels clattered again, climbing up to the pass, one of the highest in the Transylvanian Alps.

The troops pressed eagerly to get to the top and see what lay ahead. Maybe it was the plain at last? . . .

But instead their eyes lit again on the familiar sight of mountains, of ridges high and low, like huge waves of a sea of stone. Mountains, mountains, and more mountains. . . .

And the men thought: fighting, fighting and more fighting.

XX

"I'm alive and well. We're battling forward in the mountains. We're in Transylvania now, if you've heard of such a place. Giving it to both Germans and Hungarians. Thinking about home, so golden and so far away. All we see is the sun over our heads. And at night the clouds show white below us. We have everything a soldier needs. If only we could get out of these endless mountains—your heart just longs for the open.

"Don't be lonesome, Mum. Keep well.

Zhenya."

XXI

Makoveichik sat crouched over the telephone. Every now and then he would lift his red, inflamed eyes and announce:

"The Komsomol organizer's been killed."

"Lieutenant Nomokonov has been killed."

"Galya the nurse has been wounded."

The mortars, cooling, stared glumly up at Hill 805. This was the third day the infantry had been storming it. The battalions were badly thinned. Samiyev, talking by radio to the higher-ups, turned darker than ever and repeated briefly through his teeth:

"Very good . . . very good. . . ."

The rear services had been weeded time after time. Cooks, clerks, drivers, QM men had been sent along to the infantry. They were up there now, squirming ahead yard by yard among the hot stones, against which bullets smacked, turning soft with the impact.

Bryansky was called to the phone to speak to the battalion commander. And, talking to him, he too repeated through clenched teeth.

"Very good. Very good."

Then he sat down and clutched at his head.

"What does he want?" asked Sagaida.

"Says I've got to send up four men for the infantry. Who am I going to send?... Who can I give him?"

And pulling out his note-pad, he looked over his troops.

Whom was he to send? The battalion commander said it was temporary, but Bryansky knew very well that men did not return from the infantry. And how much painstaking effort, how much hard work he had put into making these fellows the mortarmen they were now. At every rest stop he had worked patiently to pass on to them his knowledge, his experience, his passionate love for his work. Particularly in the mountains.... Up here, mortar-fire gained enormously in importance. The lack of roads and the rugged terrain, limiting visibility and fire-zone, forced the infantry units to make do with only the lightest and most mobile artillery. And the modern mortar was simply made for this sort of country. The men could carry it on their backs where a heavy gun could never pass. It could blaze a way for the battalion anywhere; and to move it, nothing but its crew was needed. The high elevation of the mortar trajectory also had a special value in the mountains. A bomb discharged at the proper angle could equally well pick off a machine gun on a high spur or get the enemy at the bottom of the deepest ravine, out of the reach of all other types of fire.

Bryansky had encountered new difficulties in the mountains. His men were accustomed to firing on the plain, and here the conditions were quite different. For example, mistakes were inevitable in the mountains when gauging distances by eye. Besides, the range was affected here by the lay of the land. On the plain, if the distance to the target was gauged accurately and the charge and elevation chosen accordingly, the range was practically certain to be accurate, for conditions closely

resembled those given in the tables. But up here, the ground often sloped at a steeper angle than the tables provided for, and this told very perceptibly on the range. It was only thanks to his good grounding in mathematics that Bryansky was able to adjust himself rapidly to all these new factors; and, learning by experience himself, he made a point of passing on his newly-gained knowledge to his officers and men.

The air in the mountains was clearer than down below, and visibility a good deal better. So to men accustomed to the plain, the distances here appeared less than they really were. And Bryansky said:

“We’ve got to re-adjust our eyes!”

Until they were used to the mountains, he allowed neither himself nor his subordinates to gauge distances by eye, but insisted on having the results verified at least with the binocular scale. He gave no peace to himself or the rest. Even Sagaida and Chernysh he used to drill by the hour, teaching them to “look with a new eye.” As before, he endeavoured to summarize his experiments and observations and set them down on paper. And he was always in a hurry to do it, as if afraid that it would be too late. Like a fanatic experimenter, forgoing sleep and rest, he would lie among the hot rocks deducing additional formulas for firing up from below and down from above. He’d stuff them into his map-case and say to Chernysh, tired eyes smiling:

“If anything happens to me, you take all this.”

And one day he added pensively:

“It would be a pity if our hard-won experience went to waste. Who knows? It may come in useful some day to youngsters who are still at school today. After all, you and I don’t imagine this is the last war that will ever be fought. Goodness knows, our country has enough enemies....”

And now he was sitting, pad and pencil in hand, and looking at the company that he had taught, trained, reared as a mother rears her family. With these men, faithful and devoted, he had covered hundreds of kilometres and had hoped to cover hundreds more. But...

"Well, who is it to be?"

He started to write. He put down three names, stopped to think, and, breaking the lead of the pencil, added a fourth: "Shovkun."

The four to go were old man Baraban, his neighbour Bagri, Bulatselov, a Moldavian from Rybnitsa, and Shovkun. When told about it, none of them said or asked anything. Silently, looking down at the ground, they collected their belongings and took leave of their fellows. They'd already gone a few steps when Shovkun turned back and came diffidently up to Bryansky.

"I nearly forgot... your collars, Comrade Lieutenant... I've washed them."

And, giving his lieutenant a parting look of shy affection, he saluted and hurried off to catch up with the others.

This was about dinnerlime.

Before many hours had passed, Shovkun was coming down again, by the same path among brown shrubs and big rocks. His chin was bandaged and fresh blood was seeping through the gauze. They crowded around him, but his shattered jawbone would not function properly, and he couldn't talk, only hissed through his teeth.

"Never had a chance... to be any use," he hissed. "And Bulatselov was killed next to me.... The others were still alive...."

Leaving them again, this time to go to the rear, Shovkun went up to Bryansky once more.

"Comrade Lieutenant... be careful...." Bryansky just managed to make out. "Look out for yourself...."

Bryansky gave his hand a hard squeeze.

"When you're better, come back to us. I'll always be glad to have you."

"I'll do my best, Comrade Lieutenant."

When Shovkun set off, descending slowly to the bottom of the gorge, Bryansky stood for quite a time looking after him. Then he walked over to Chernysh, sat down on a warm stone beside him and said earnestly:

"Zhenya . . . you remember what I said. . . . If anything happens to me, take the map-case. It's got all my . . . everything I . . . I know you'll carry on with it. You know all my ideas . . . and understand them. . . ."

Chernysh said nothing, only pressed his hand.

High in the sunny sky over the mountaintops, a flock of slender broad-winged birds was flying, their heads stretched forward. Bryansky watched them.

"Going South, to warmer parts. Have you ever thought about the routes that birds follow? Our birds don't come here. From Byeloruss they fly down over the Ukraine, and then over the Black Sea, I believe. . . ."

This was the first time Chernysh had heard Bryansky call Byelorussia by the affectionate diminutive of "Byeloruss." There was a tenderness in the way he spoke the word.

Khoma Khayetsky had poked his head out of the weapon-pit that he had hacked at all night and was peering into the undergrowth on the left.

"Fritzes!" he said suddenly, paling.

The others looked sharply where he was pointing.

"You're imagining! There's some of our boys over there."

"It's Fritzes, I tell you!"

"It can't be!"

But here several voices called out together:

"Fritzes!"

And now all of them could see the Germans crawling and crawling silently towards them, twisting in

and out among the stones. Where they had seeped through no one knew; but then, there was nothing particularly surprising about that—quite often, up here, neither the enemy nor ourselves had a continuous line of defence. The fighting was mostly for the roads and for individual heights that rose like bastions over the surrounding ridges.

Bryansky at once divined the enemy's manoeuvre and realized the danger. The Germans were skirting the hill to cut off the battalion that was storming it above. He gave prompt orders to turn all the mortars upon them, and reported briefly to the battalion commander, finishing with the words:

"We'll take them on."

The mortars thrust up their barrels almost vertically, pointing straight at the sky. The bombs, looking like so many black fishes, traced the steepest of trajectories in the blue and came down in the very thick of the enemy. There, amid the stones, smoke and flames, a fearful din went up, and the Germans rose to charge.

Twilight was falling, the shadows of the hills slanted across the gorge.

Bryansky looked round at his men.

"Comrades," he said calmly, and only his pallor betrayed the effort that this composure cost him. "The fate of the whole battalion, the fate of those men in the infantry, depends on you and me. For us there can be no retreat. Even one step back would be treason. Perhaps some of us are to die here and won't see the day of Victory. But let us remember one thing: we have a great mission to fulfil. And we shall stand and die here!"

He suddenly remembered having said this to his men at Stalingrad.

They stood up to their chests in the weapon-pits, in a sort of rigid trance. The world was a vacuum, every-

thing seemed to disappear—there were only those bent figures in enemy uniforms, coming closer and closer.

“Fire!” Bryansky ordered.

They opened up from all the small arms they had.

The Germans fired their tommy guns haphazardly as they came on, dropped down, got up and came running again, nearer and nearer, and already you could make out their distorted faces.

“Grenades!” Bryansky shouted, and threw his first, watching its flight and picking up another right away. His eyes blazed keen blue fire. “Grenades! Grenades!”

The grenades went over one after another, a black fog arose, and now the Germans were rushing the mortar position. And at this moment everybody heard Bryansky cry.

“For home and country! For Stalin!”

Never, before or after, did Chernysh hear those words uttered like that. They were charged with a special force and significance here, welding them all into one tense whole. As in a blaze of magic light, there flashed across his memory the river at the frontier and the sunny fields beyond it—the graduation-ceremony at the training school—his mother in their town so far away—a long caravan out in the sand—and something more, vague and indefinable, but infinitely beautiful; and all he was fighting for came home to him with a new poignancy. He saw Bryansky grip the stone parapet with his small hands and vault onto it lightly, without looking round, as if he had not the slightest doubt that the men would follow suit; the next instant he had jumped forward, swinging a heavy anti-tank grenade. Chernysh, too, found himself up on the parapet in one go. He was looking straight ahead; but out of the corner of his eye he saw the men leaping out of the pits as if some force were pushing them out, and all of them had pale, intent faces.

“For home and country!” Bryansky cried again, and

Chernysh scarcely knew his strong voice, it was so changed.

He saw Bryansky run a few steps sideways and throw the grenade, at the same time pulling out his pistol. There was a roar and a swirl, and for some fraction of a second the Germans, who were right there, on top of them, disappeared in a black mass of smoke. Chernysh saw Bryansky fall, but he didn't stop, and none of them stopped. They were all rushing forward, bending low and shouting something in the smoke and fumes; and Chernysh was shouting too.

The Germans turned and fled.

The sight spurred Chernysh on with such irresistible force that he felt as if not even an order from the marshal himself could have stopped him at this moment. Just in front of him he glimpsed a German uniform tunic. The German's water bottle, covered with a mug, thumped his fat rump as he went, and Chernysh wanted to catch hold of it, and ran still faster—he wasn't running, but flying like a bird, his whole body light and springy as an India-rubber ball. Feeling something heavy in his hand, he swung out and hit the German on the top of the head. The fellow slumped to the ground, and Chernysh suddenly realised that he had slugged him with a bomb, which had come to be in his hand he didn't know when or how. "Hope it doesn't go off!" he found himself thinking. . .

"Let them have it! Hack 'em down!"

"Avenge Bryansky!" he heard someone shout, and rushed forward again, into that chaos of roaring, groaning, thumping. "Then Bryansky's been killed!" he thought as he went, but it didn't stop him; on the contrary, it filled him still fuller of ferocious strength and he wasn't surprised that his friend's name was already ringing as a battle-cry. He saw a lanky spectacled Ger-

man turn round in front of Denis Blazhenko, throw up his hands and cry out in a ghastly voice:

"Hitler *kaput!*"

"And so are you!"

And Denis slashed with a pick straight at the bridge of his nose.

"Avenge Bryansky!"

The gorge echoed with the sounds of fighting. Hob-nailed boots ground over the stones in front of Chernysh. Setting his teeth and straining every fibre, he spurted forward and hit out with both hands at the German's back and neck; then, when he'd brought him down, he dug his fingers into his throat and pressed until the fellow wheezed and his face turned purple.

Khayetsky raced past, his whiskers tousled and terrifying; he was whacking away at a German with a small shovel and trying to grab hold of his tunic.

For an instant Chernysh caught sight of Sagaida, who was tearing along with bloodshot eyes, his blouse open and showing his hairy chest. In his hand he clutched his pistol. That reminded Chernysh that he had one too. He whipped it out and rushed on, and they all rushed on; they were already mixed in with the Germans, who stumbled on blindly, their eyes crazed with fear. Rifle-butts swished through the air, men screamed, groaned. Again Chernysh saw a German in front of him, he looked just like the one he had choked—his hobnails were scraping the stone, his water bottle bobbed up and down. Close by somebody was yelling "Halt!" and Chernysh too cried at the German's back:

"Halt! Halt!"

The fellow looked round automatically, tripped on the stones and fell.

"I'm a Russian!" he wailed, getting up on his knees and raising his shaking hands. "I'm from Solnechnogorsk!"

"They don't have your kind in Solnechnogorsk!" Chernysh replied, and, raising his pistol, shot him straight in the chest.

He wiped his face on his sleeve, and his eye came to rest on the top of the hill. There, against the evening sky, a man's silhouette was outlined, motionless as though hewn out of stone. The sun had long sunk behind the hill, but the sky above still glowed with fitful colours. The silhouette didn't move. Was it a tree?

But at this moment the figure, which up to now had stood in profile, turned round, and he could see the outline of a tommy gun in the man's uplifted arm.

"That means we've got the height!" The thing came to Chernysh in a flash of realization, and at the top of his voice he shouted:

"We've got it! Got it!"

XXII

"... Looks as if he was killed by his own grenade," Sagaida said, bending over Bryansky and looking for the wound. "It exploded too close."

Bryansky was lying on his right side, his head back and his whole body straining forward, like a bird in flight. One arm was stretched out, as if he wanted to reach something that was lying there. Gripped in the hand was his little pistol.

He lay there as if he were alive. There was no blood on his white face, and the eyes weren't closed, only slightly narrowed, as they used to be when he was looking through his field glasses and giving orders. Suddenly a shot cut through the utter stillness, and the bullet rang on a stone a few yards away.

"What's that?" Sagaida called out, seeing a wisp of smoke rising from Bryansky's pistol. "What happened?"

Somebody had inadvertently touched Bryansky's hand in the gloom, and the pistol had gone off.

"Yuri!" Chernysh cried in anguish, standing over the slight, still body of his superior and friend. "Yuri! Even after you're dead you go on shooting!"

The shadows deepened on the mountains; far above, the moon came up.

They opened Bryansky's blouse and inspected his wound. A splinter had entered the heart.

Crowding around him with a flashlight, the men looked in turn at the photos they'd found in his notecase. It was as though their dead commander were opening all his secrets to them now.

A sad-faced woman, in a black shawl tied in an old-fashioned way, looked straight at the camera, her hands folded in her lap.

"His mother," Sagaida said.

His mother! It had never occurred to most of them, somehow, that Bryansky too had a mother....

A girl in a bathing-suit standing on the seashore, a paddle in her hand. The sun was in her eyes, she had screwed them up and was laughing.

"His girl...."

From the left-hand pocket of the blouse they got out his Party card. The leaves were all stuck together, the splinter had gone right through.

They'd send it to Moscow... to a museum....

Denis Blazhenko said resolutely, addressing them all.

"I'm joining the Party."

And, meeting his brother's eyes, he added:

"I've prepared myself for it."

The company sergeant-major arrived with a party of soldiers, leading pack-horses loaded with ammunition. The pack-saddles were of Bryansky's design. When the mountains forced them to abandon the supply waggons and switch entirely to packs, Bryansky had suggested this.

simple design instead of the regular army packs, which were heavy and cumbersome. Originally introduced in the mortar company, the idea had spread rapidly, and now the whole division was using these saddles. Bryansky's horse too was loaded with ammunition, and sweated under its weight.

"Sergeant-Major!" Sagaida called. "See that?"

He pointed to the dead bodies.

"I know," the sergeant-major replied heavily. Coming here, he had met the company's wounded men, on their way to the dressing station.

"You know, friend, do you? . . . Well, if you know, then pull off your shirt. Because look. . . ."

Sagaida undid the pin on his chest, and his torn blouse fell in two.

The men sat down around the thermos containers to have their supper.

The sergeant-major poured out the regulation allowance of neat alcohol and handed it deferentially to each, as if these weren't the same men as always. Makoveichik did not drink the stuff usually; he was afraid it would knock him out, and used to turn over his ration to Khoma. Today all of a sudden he drank it down and in fact asked Khoma for more. Khayetsky would not let him have it, though, promising to settle up another time.

They drank and ate in silence, as though after a day of bitter hard work.

The battalion commander called up and put Sagaida in command of the mortars until Headquarters sent somebody along from the reserve.

"And Shovkun said he'd come back to the company," Roman Blazhenko said. "He once told the senior lieutenant he'd stay with him all the way to Berlin."

They buried Bryansky the same evening on the very top of that newly-captured nameless height, Hill 805.

As a veteran of the regiment, he was buried with all the military honours possible under the circumstances.

The men stood sombre around the grave, listening to the funeral speech of Major Vorontsov. He was rightly considered the best speaker in the regiment and the division. But it wasn't only the public speaker they were hearing now. The major stood there in the padded jacket that he hardly ever took off, his left arm in a sling on his chest. He had gone into action with the troops in the assault, and had got wounded, although lightly. With his bald head, large ears and slight stoop, he stood over the grave like an old father among his sons. The Gold Star shone clear on his blouse above his bandaged arm.

Bryansky had been more to Vorontsov than the commander of one of the mortar companies. The major had covered the whole distance from Stalingrad together with Bryansky. He had recommended Bryansky for admission to the Party. As if it were his own son, he had watched how this able young officer was coming on.

"... To his dying breath he was true to his oath, true to the colours, true to his country," Vorontsov said.

While Bryansky lay on a groundsheet, white, calm and clear-browed, with the moonlight gleaming on his decorations, and seemed to be listening to what was said about him.

The serene, tranquil evening had about it that feeling of spaciousness, that touch of the infinite, that is peculiar to evenings in those high regions.

"This is not the first nor the last comrade that we are leaving in the Alps. We go ahead, and they remain behind on every hill, like faithful sentinels of ours. Look around, and you will see their faces, their silhouettes, on heights far and near. They will stand like eternal sentinels in foreign climes, an eternal reminder to the whole world of the sacrifices of our people, who faced

up fearlessly to the German hordes and are paying with their own blood for the liberation of Europe."

Chernysh stood with Bryansky's map-case over his shoulder, pistol gripped in his hand to fire the salute, and gazed at the distant summits, distinct in the cold light of the moon. He kept fancying that you could see from here the height where Gai was buried.

"In the daytime these silhouettes on the mountainsides will be visible for hundreds of kilometres around, and at night they will flame and shine, a reminder of themselves and of their country. These are not only sacrifices," the major was saying. "They are imperishable glowing messages written in letters of our blood!"

It was extraordinarily light; the full moon, like a paler sun, flooded with its beams the mountain ridges that stretched in every direction, as far as the eye could reach.

Moving his elbow, Chernysh felt somebody's warm arm, and he derived comfort from the contact.

The further he left the home country behind him, the greater the distance that divided him from it, the dearer his battle comrades became to him. They seemed to breathe its breath, they spoke its language, they carried its faithfulness in their hearts. This feeling of brotherhood, which probably filled the others too, became the more poignant as their number grew less. Probably that was why, standing now in a grim, silent circle around Bryansky's grave, they all pressed closer together, shoulder to shoulder and elbow to elbow, to feel that warm contact, the only warm thing amid the cold of these alien peaks.

"... His image, lit up by the beauty of fidelity, will live forever in our hearts. For a Bo'shevik officer of the Stalin Guards—salute!"

They wrapped Bryansky's body, still wearing the canvas boots, in the groundsheet on which it lay, and lowered it into the grave. Paying their last tribute to this

officer of their great army, they raised all their different small arms, of Soviet and captured patterns, and the metal glinted in the moonlight. As the order came, they fired upwards—once and twice and three times....

All night Sagaida's men struggled along the gorge in the wake of the infantry, dragging after them pack horses loaded with bombs and mortar-parts in the saddles of Bryansky's inventing. And it seemed unnatural that they no longer had, stepping confidently at their head and looking round at them, that fair-haired youth with his thoughtful eyes. At Regimental Headquarters cartographers were already making a copy of the topographical map and entering on it Hill 805, where he lay buried.

The bottom of the gorge was filled with a milky white fog. The moon was going down. The stones had cooled during the night, and the men shivered in their blouses.

"Say, Chernysh, what's the date today?" Sagaida inquired gloomily. He was hobbling by Chernysh's side, for he had stumbled into a pit in the dark and injured his foot.

Chernysh didn't know what the date was. It seemed to him a long, long time that they had been fighting in the Alps.

"You know," Sagaida went on, "his mother's real old and all alone. Now she won't have the allotment he made to her. I've decided I'll make her one. What do you think?"

"That would be grand."

"What do I want with money? Whatever I need I get without it. And for her it would be a help. Yuri wrote her about me once, told her what happened to my folks.... So she used to ask after me in every letter. Called me 'Sonny' too."

The stones gleamed dully in the moonlight.

"I'm glad we finished them off on the spot,"

Sagaida said all of a sudden. "All I've suffered, all I've lost, all I've pent up against them I'll take with me to the West!"

Chernysh clenched his fingers in aching misery. Surely, there had been no pain in his short life to compare with this. Bryansky had been his first friend at the front. And this masculine friendship, tested by constant danger of death, is harder to forget than a first love.

He kept seeing a girl with a paddle on the seashore, laughing at the sun. He had only glimpsed her on a photo, but appealed to her mentally as if she were there in the flesh.

"Go on loving him!" he pleaded. "Go on loving him though he'll never come back to you from this height ... just as Gai won't come home from his. No coming home for them! ... The war will be over, there'll be salutes for the victory, but they will stay on here as sentinels of ours, as a symbol of our fidelity...."

The following morning a young sapper, putting up markers where the battalion had passed, caught sight of the rock beneath which Bryansky was buried. It was a landmark that people were sure to notice. He dug into the stone a few times with his pick, and an "L" appeared upon it, with an arrow pointing westwards.

XXIII

That same morning Sagaida's men heaved a sigh of relief after climbing the last ridge. Below them spread a great plateau, green with vineyards, meadows and orchards. It was a comfort to look at this plain in the mountains, stretching for scores of miles. Beyond it, far over in the West, blue mountains rose again.

"I suppose this is that Alpine pasture?" Sagaida asked Chernysh.

"What Alpine pasture?"

"Well, there used to be a scent before the war called 'Alpine Pasture.' I gave Lilya a bottle once for her birthday."

"Now nature itself is giving it to you."

Smoke rose from burning villages. Down the roads moved armoured units and a Cossack cavalry corps that had broken through further left.

Samiyev's regiment halted in the first place they came to. Sagaida found out from the battalion commander that the regiment was now in the second line and would most likely stay here until tomorrow, waiting for replacements that officers of the reserve were bringing up.

The place had got quite a battering from our *stor-moviks*. In the houses that remained, the troops were soon making themselves at home. They were heating water in empty petrol tins, naked soldiers were washing in the sunlight, others were cutting their hair, writing letters, reading newspapers. The Headquarters scouts had a concertina playing, and on the gate they had chalked up a sign: "Welcome." As the mortarmen were passing their gate, Kazakov came riding out on a little white donkey. He was clean, freshly shaved and looked well satisfied. In his hand was an empty bottle.

"Where are you off to, Kazakov?"

"Oh, I'm going to Jerusalem!"

The men gave a whoop and a whistle, and the donkey went tearing down the street. Kazakov gripped it with his long legs and balanced deftly on its back, with the bottle in his hand.

The mortarmen stopped in an orchard at the edge of the village. Fragrant apples of white southern varieties made the air smell spicy. Ripe, red-cheeked peaches weighed down the boughs. Ripe filberts dropped and littered the grass. Next to the orchard was an untended vineyard—several acres of it, with heavy clusters of pellucid grapes hanging down to the very ground.

"Hey, Roman!" Khoma called. "Come here and eat peaches. Eat all you want, just so you don't stuff them in your pockets. 'Cause there's enough here for you, and your old lady, and your young ones, and all your relations, even if you've got a whole battalion of them!"

After cleaning their arms, most of the men lay down and slept. Only Khayetsky couldn't keep still, though he hadn't slept all night either. He prowled about the farmyard with an iron rod in his hand, peering into all the corners and poking about in the ground. He was forever looking for hidden treasure in this alien ground, as if he had been here before and buried it. He wanted dearly to find a buried keg of hundred-year-old wine and treat the whole *kolkhoz*, as he liked to call the company—wanted the whole outfit to enjoy themselves. After he'd sounded out the whole yard and found nothing, he settled down at last—took a shovel and dug himself a ditch. Khoma was a great one for digging. In a few minutes the ditch was ready and the bottom lined with sweet-smelling grass. He climbed in and lay down to sleep, tommy gun under his head. He loathed the damn Messers and could rest properly only if he was dug in.

"Good old Mother Earth," he apostrophized, "I'm always happiest with you! Feels like being cuddled up in Mother's arms...."

A mounted tommy gunner was driving prisoners down the street. The sun beat down upon them and they panted heavily as they jogged along.

"Keep 'em moving," said Roman, standing on sentry duty at the gate. "Look how they hold on to those sacks of theirs, even though they're sweating like pigs. Wonder what they've stuffed in them?"

Tanks—our own and Rumanian—rumbled through the village without stopping. Rumanian soldiers in black berets sat on board, sucking raw eggs.

"What, are they going to fight the Fritzes too?" Roman asked a Headquarters orderly.

"They've started already."

Roman felt the spot on his arm where he'd been hit, down by those pillboxes. It was all healed by now.

"Let them make up for all they've done," he said, looking after the tanks as they disappeared in the dry dust.

After dinner Chernysh and Denis Blazhenko went over to Vorontsov for the Party recommendations he had promised. They found him on the veranda of the house where the political section was quartered. The major was sitting on a chair, with a plain, rather forbidding nurse dressing his wound.

"Take a seat," he said, "I won't be a moment...."

Chernysh sat down and looked over at the major, thinking of the first time he had seen him, before that line of pillboxes. It seemed such ages ago.... He'd just heard Bryansky's name for the first time, and didn't know then that he would come to be Bryansky's best friend, and that before very much longer, he'd be burying him at night upon a hilltop. And Samiyev had wanted to send Bryansky to the Academy after the war....

The dressing done, Vorontsov produced pen and paper and got ready to write. He asked Chernysh a few questions. Chernysh had been born the winter that the country took leave of Lenin. He had been a little pink-faced baby when Stalin had vowed to carry on Lenin's work. And those who were lying in their cradles then, the newly-born generation, unconsciously took over that vow, imbibing it with their mothers' milk.... Now they were carrying it over the roads of Europe....

The Young Pioneer troop—school—mountain trips with his father in the summer—the army training school. That was all. His life had been so clear and straightfor-

ward. There had been few clouds in it, few losses—and lots of laughter and sunshine. His first hard blow had been the death of Yuri Bryansky. He felt it pressing on his heart, like a solid, physical weight. The major was writing. When he had finished and was waving the sheet of paper to make it dry, he looked across at the purple mountains in the distance.

“More Alps over there,” he said.

“I know,” Chernysh replied, guessing what was in his mind.

Then Vorontsov made out Denis’ recommendation. Denis stood very straight and saluted as he took it.

On the way back he started talking in a confidential way that was unusual for him:

“I think it must be Sunday today, Comrade Lieutenant.... Seems like a holiday, somehow.... See, I’m joining the Party. I don’t know if you feel like I do about it. It isn’t as if it would give me any... well, any practical advantages, you might say. I’ll still be just a corporal, same as I am. Lug the mortar on my back, same as I have been lugging it. In fact, there’ll be more I’ll have to do. The Party organizer will be giving me assignments now. And all the same I feel good. If I had to tell about a Party member’s rights and duties, I could tell better about the duties than the rights. If I’m joining the Party, it means I’m taking on myself an extra duty to the people. Taking on an extra load. So it’ll be harder—but it feels sort of good inside.... Feels like Sunday, like a holiday....”

Towards evening, clouds overcast the sky. The world turned grey, and a steady, even drizzle started, the kind that goes on and on. All at once it came home to them that the summer was over, that autumn was setting in, with its endless rains, bogged-down roads and cold winds. That was worse than bullets or shells. The longing for home became unbearable at these times.

Chernysh and Sagaida were sitting with the scouts that evening. Somebody was playing the concertina, and around the room melancholy voices seconded it. Kazakov sat at the table, his cheek in his hand, silent and glum. In his mind too those songs of home stirred many recollections.

The black raindrops pattered on the panes, the iron roof rattled in the wind, and the lighted room seemed the cosier because of it. The "Welcome" sign on the gate was already getting washed off. It was a comfort to think that there was no more marching today, that you could have a good long singsong in a nice dry house, and then sleep in peace on some straw till the morning.

The sentry outside stopped somebody and demanded the password. Then boots came clumping and Sagaida's orderly stood in the doorway, with his tommy gun on his chest. The water streamed down the groundsheet on his shoulders.

"Comrade Lieutenant. The battalion's starting out."

Sagaida swore and got to his feet, tightening his belt.

A Headquarters runner brought orders for Kazakov to report right away to the chief-of-staff.

Chernysh and Sagaida went out and the slashing rain stung their hot faces. They heard the men calling one another in the farmyards and metal rattling as they got ready.

"Hey, Ivanov!" somebody shouted in the dark. "Where are you, damn your hide?"

In the West, half the sky was ablaze. The rain poured down, dripping cold on their necks, and it seemed queer that that blaze didn't go out under it.

"That's Europe on fire," Sagaida said, stamping through the mud.

Chernysh saw his wet face in the pale reflections.

A black horseman galloped down the street, the wind billowing out his groundsheet; mud spurted out from

under the horse's hoofs. Sagaida cursed and shielded his face with his hand.

The blaze in the night stood before them like a flaming sea rearing up into the sky.

XXIV

The battalion moved ahead in close formation. An unending blackness enveloped them. Surely this couldn't be the rolling green plateau that had met their eyes that morning, flooded with sunlight all the way to the blue mountains beyond!

The men trudged silently in the face of a wet headwind. The mortar company's horses snorted and gasped—their hoofs stuck in the mud. Vines, maize-stalks, sunflower-stems crackled underfoot. They were pushing across country—there didn't seem to be any roads here at all. All the asphalt that the Cossack corps had ridden a'long in the morning appeared to have vanished in the night.

The battalion commander stopped for a moment with the adjutant, snapped on a flashlight under his raincoat, and consulted the map; then he went on again to the head of the column. The boggy ground made sucking sounds, as if it were kissing the soldiers' unwearying feet.

"Oh dearie, dearie me," Khayetsky sang out, struggling ahead with his horse somewhere at the back. "Isn't this mud ever going to end?"

Just then the boots of the forward men struck on stone, and the whole battalion sighed with relief.

"A road!"

The infantry knew that they wouldn't be marching down this road; so did the mortarmen know that it wasn't for them to gallop over its ringing surface; for, running north and south, it wasn't in line with the direction of the advance, and you couldn't move it like a

clock-hand.... They knew it, but all the same, the fact of the road being there cheered them up. Let it be for ten paces, for five paces, even—only to feel solid ground underfoot, not this heavy, sodden ploughland, in which you would surely sink, head and all, if you weren't moving all the time.

They crossed the asphalt, and there, close beyond it, a railway embankment loomed up in the dark, running parallel with the road. Figures darted about below it, there were sounds of Rumanian and a word or two of broken Russian.

"Hear the Rumanies jabbering Russian?" somebody said, amused.

"They're going to be on our right wing," Sagaida informed Chernysh; he was just back from seeing the battalion commander.

Just across the railway line, enemy troop carriers opened up. The echoing machine-gun bursts seemed to be hitting a sky made of corrugated iron. Rumanian soldiers ran back and forth with armfuls of straw for their fox holes.

"All the best, mates!" Roman Blazhenko called to them cheerfully. "All the best to you, brothers!"

The men had pulled off their groundsheets to keep the mortars dry, and were digging weapon-pits in only their blouses, tools rattling in the dark. Sagaida and Chernysh squatted at the foot of the embankment; they made no attempt to take cover from the rain, because there was no cover to take, and no point to it anyway—they were drenched to the skin. The earth under them, soft as a sponge, was warm from the heat of their bodies.

"I sometimes try to imagine," Sagaida said hollowly, "what it would be like if the world were all one. No languages, no frontiers... and no wars!... Nice white towns.... Go to Baghdad if you want to, or to Buenos Aires if you like that better.... And for people all to be

equal and free.... Instead of prowling about the world, snapping their teeth at others...."

After a pause, he added in a different tone:

"If I met the German that stole my girl—can you imagine it?"

"D'you think you're the only one, Sagaida? Look how many of our people they have carried off! And how many hopes, expectations, glorious plans they've stolen or smashed! I keep seeing Bryansky, hearing his voice. Remember how he said: 'We give up everything for you, our country; even our hearts....' And it's true, you know. Aren't we giving up everything we had a right to? Our private lives, our personal desires, our plans and dreams and emotions—they're all fused in one thing—the will to victory.... Maybe that's why it gets still dearer, still more precious to us—our country, I mean—the more we suffer on its account. Here I'm twenty, and of course I've met all sorts in these twenty years: people who were straight and fine, and others who were petty, mean, cruel. But it's a funny thing, I never think of the rotters now; I only remember the good ones, and see our whole country, from way up North and down to the Pamirs, as one grand family of good, honest, hard-working people.... There is a greatness of heart about a nation that sends its vast armies to liberate Europe!"

One of the men digging in the dark knocked his shovel against a stone. A voice came from the pit:

"You know what I'd do to Hitler and all these other... war culprits... if I caught 'em?" it said. "I wouldn't shoot him.... No, I'd just drag him out of his armchair and stick him in this mucky trench, and let him dig and dig and dig all these autumn nights, till he rotted in this filth, like he'd got syphilis. Until he choked with this mud.... Then no minister would ever want any wars again!"

They'd just dug in when a runner came to say there were orders to move on, because the enemy was falling back.

Sagaida told them to pack the horses again.

They clambered onto the embankment, slipping, and hauling each other up as if they were climbing a cliff—and once more an inky waste lay before them. Fires dotted that sea of darkness with islands of red, far and near. Their static glow seemed to invest those black expanses with a cosmic infinity, as if one could go on for centuries, and still the soggy ground would squelch underfoot, the rain would drizzle on, the darkness would persist, with those motionless rose-coloured cliffs rearing in its midst.

Long past midnight, Sagaida's outfit came up to one of these glowing cones, and Chernysh saw that it wasn't any island of rose-coloured rock, but only a lot of tremendously long cornstacks, stables, barns, burning and burning, with a horrible callousness. From time to time a beam would crack and hot tiles rattle down from the roof—then everything would be burning again, slowly and evenly.

The only thing not burning was the manor house in the middle of the spacious yard, lit up by flames on every side. Slender white columns flanked the entrance, with wild vines climbing up them. Untouched by the fire, the white house stood there like the lord of these black steppes. The gaping windows, with orange glints on the few remaining panes, stared with an air of silent mystery at the armed strangers who filled the yard and stopped for a moment, wondering. There is always this pause, if only of a second, before a place which a few moments ago was an alien, hidden world and was shooting at you, and which now you are about to enter. You know the enemy is there no longer, and yet you stop, because the building still gives off an emanation of hostility. And

only when you go inside and shout something in there to your mate—or to yourself, for that matter—do you seem to impart your spirit to the alien walls, and they become your own, like a captured gun that has fired in your hands for the first time.

In the cattle houses, the animals bellowed, choking with the smoke and burning up alive. A little foal, with its fur scorched, leapt snorting out of the flames and stood still, looking fearfully about it. Seeing the mortarmen's horses, it headed towards them, seeking its dam. Such a small, helpless creature, it toddled along on its long thin legs and pushed its nose trustingly into the men's hands. Everybody wanted to stroke it. Roman Blazhenko put his arm around its neck and pressed its nose to his cheek. Chernysh smiled wryly. The little thing brought happy memories crowding into his mind.

"Look out, you'll prick it with your whiskers!" the fellows called to Blazhenko.

The fires around were warming up the air, and the men didn't feel so cold any longer.

XXV

In the afternoon the rumour got about that the Rumanians on the right had taken to their heels. Nobody could have said who started the report, but everyone knew it already. There was a new air of nervous tension about the men's movements. And though the mortars still coughed, as before, behind a smouldering corn-rick—even while putting in the bomb, a soldier would be listening keenly with one ear to what was happening in the infantry lines. That was in the gully beyond the manor; and things there seemed none too good. The machine guns jammed. A Headquarters runner dashed

by, and when Sagaida called to him, he didn't answer, only waved distractedly. Some staff officers appeared, going somewhere in a great hurry. The Headquarters scouts raced past; Kazakov was running with his jacket open and his tommy gun in his hand, peering intently ahead. He didn't even notice Sagaida.

The battalion commander wanted fire, fire and more fire. Sagaida pounded away, casting worried glances at the growing pile of empty boxes, for the ammunition column was still on its way over the roadless country.

Chernysh stood at the observation post that they'd set up during the night in the field beyond the manor. He had volunteered to correct the fire, and Sagaida had agreed, for in his heart of hearts he believed that Chernysh was better at it than himself. In the fox hole at his feet, Roman Blazhenko huddled over the telephone. Roman had been detailed to telephone duty when one of the telephone men was wounded at Hill 805, and he had tackled this new job with his usual diligence. At the same time he acted as orderly to Chernysh. Not that Chernysh had told him to; he did it of his own accord, because he wanted to.

Chernysh directed the mortar fire to the right end of the gully—some German armoured troop carriers were just entering it. The mortars blazed away, but the carriers were a difficult target to hit. Several bombs landed behind them, where parties of infantry were following; and when the smoke cleared, Chernysh saw little knots of Germans forming, most likely around their killed or wounded.

Now the fun was starting on the left too, very close, where things had been quiet so far. The air rang with "Hurrahs," but he couldn't see the infantry. The troop carriers crawled right into the gully, peppering it with tracer bullets. A real blizzard of fire went up, the noise got louder and louder.

Out of this blizzard, men were leaping out one by one and running towards the manor.

Chernysh figured out that it was true about the Rumanians—they'd succumbed to panic and denuded the flank. Apparently, we hadn't had time to bring up the anti-tank guns, and the battalion was in a very tight spot. Orders had evidently been given to fall back on the manor, and now groups of infantrymen went running past the observation post, their heavy, muddy coats swishing. Chernysh thought he caught sight of the bearded fellow whose horse had carried him hell-for-leather up and down that Rumanian road, with him bellowing: "Stop him! Stop him!" Everything was flying past Chernysh; then, with a little cry of surprise, he flung out his arms as if he meant to halt this rush with his body, and dropped to the ground. And the infantrymen rushed on under the thickening hail of bullets.

Blazhenko hadn't seemed to be watching, but he noticed or sensed instantly that the lieutenant wasn't in this commotion any more. He wasn't there! The moment he realized it, Roman leapt out of the fox hole, and came upon him at once. Chernysh, deathly pale, lay sprawled in the mud with his pistol in his hand. His eyes were closed, and he was moaning softly, as he might have done in his sleep. Roman saw right away that he had been hit in the head—there was a puddle of blood around it. It never occurred to Blazhenko that he might run away and leave his lieutenant lying there. He called imperiously to the nearest infantryman, and the fellow stopped in frightened wonder.

"Help us pick him up!"

He swung Chernysh onto his back, holding him with both hands, like a sack of corn in the *kolkhoz* at home. Chernysh groaned. Roman hadn't thought this slim youth could be so heavy. He seemed to have got a hundred times heavier in this action.

Everything was a mass of groans and rattling, a deafening uproar. It dimmed your consciousness, gave an extraordinary fleetness to your feet. Roman felt as if his back were protected by armour, as if no bullet could possibly hit him while he was carrying this particular burden. Surely no force can kill a man on such a sacred mission!

A soldier fell just in front of him, his skull blown to pieces by a dum-dum bullet.

"It can't do that to me!" Roman thought, and stepped over the man's legs.

He ran on, sweating, coughing, panting, straining his eyes to see further ahead. Some of the soldiers rushed right through the manor grounds, others popped into the house to get their breath. Bullets crumbled the brick walls, like so many picks. Roman pulled up by the porch and climbed to the doorway. Soldiers from different companies were crowded just inside—artillerymen and scouts, radio-operators and runners. A few Roman knew by sight, the majority were strangers. Then he heard Sagaida's voice coming from the crowd.

"Chernysh! Chernysh!"

They laid him down carefully on the cement floor.

Kazakov came up, he had taken cover here too. Lying before him now was no longer the spick-and-span young subaltern he had met at the frontier bridge—his breeches were smeared with mud, the sole on one boot was coming off, his shoulder straps were soft and faded . . . while his thick black hair had grown, and there was a dark moustache on his firm upper lip.

Chernysh was unconscious. He had been hit both in the head and the side. They bandaged him as well as they could, tearing up soiled field-dressings that they had carried about for months. While they were attending to him, soldiers dashed out one after another and ran across the yard. Some managed to get through between

explosions, others disappeared in the bursts, and tatters of clothing flew upwards with the smoke and splashing mud. Then two fell, writhing, on the porch itself, and nobody ventured out any more. A troop carrier had come up close on the left and its guns were raking the yard.

Flashing from man to man went the word they dreaded most:

"Trapped."

Sagaida walked over from where Chernysh was lying.

"What's that? What did you say?"

"We're trapped."

He rushed instinctively to the door, but the way was blocked with wounded who were crawling in from outside, leaving trails of blood on the steps.

The yard was empty by now, except for a few wounded men groaning here and there. The noise receded and died down.

Sagaida scanned the faces about him apprehensively, and his eyes met those of Volgin, an artillery lieutenant he knew. Volgin's look convinced him: yes, this was it, the thing that each of them feared. The iron ring had closed. The men, subdued and expectant, were following every movement of Sagaida's. Without looking at them, he could see their eyes—questioning, seeking hope—and he felt a tremendous unfamiliar responsibility settling upon his shoulders. The weight of it pressed him down.

"All right, then," he said, straightening up, "all right...."

He squared his shoulders. Standing across from him was a tall middle-aged soldier with a light machine gun. His cheeks were hollow, so hollow that the skin was stretched taut over the bones.

"Does that gun of yours work?" Sagaida asked.

"Suppose it does, so what?" The man looked at him

sullenly. His hands, covered with dried mud, were grey and rough, like emery-paper.

"Does it work, I say?"

"Well, all right, it does...."

"Don't you 'well' me, my man!... Lie down here in the doorway."

"I'm not of your battalion...."

"Lie down, I say!"

"Don't shout!" The man raised his head coolly. "I've seen 'em tougher than you without getting scared.... And here right now... every man's as good as another."

A dark flush mantled in Sagaida's face.

He stepped up close to the machine gunner and, barely controlling himself, said:

"That was an order!"

"Order your own men about...."

The words were no sooner out of the soldier's mouth than Sagaida had knocked him down with a swift, hard blow.

"Get over there!"

The man crawled silently to the door and proceeded to set up the machine gun with professional skill.

"Who's No. 2?"

"I am."

"How many drums have you got? Bring them over here!"

Kazakov also came forward, addressing Sagaida with marked official respect.

"Comrade Lieutenant! This doorway is the worst danger-spot. Let me be here too!"

"Go ahead."

After posting the guard at the entrance, Sagaida inspected the house anxiously and took stock of his arms, men and ammunition. As he went about it, his confidence increased, and the position didn't seem so hopeless any more.

He stationed men at the windows and at every hole that could be used for firing and observation, giving them detailed instructions, like a routine guard. And the soldiers calmed down, as if they were indeed going on garrison guard duty. Strangers from other outfits, they obeyed Sagaida's orders without questioning and addressed him with respect, as they would the guard commander. And their eyes looked at him eagerly, with hidden hope, as if their salvation now depended upon him.

Most of the men were gathered in the big hall on the first floor. With its many windows, it afforded command of a good part of the yard, which the carriers had already entered, closing in about the house like watchdogs. Germans shouted right under the windows:

"Russ, surrender! Surrender, we won't kill you!"

And catching sight of a Kazakh soldier, they whooped and yelled:

"Mongolia! Asia!"

"Russ, surrender!"

"Grenades!" Sagaida ordered. "Russ never surrenders!..."

Keeping their heads hidden, the men let fly the grenades. There was a crash and a roar down below, and long-drawn wails; "Oh-h-h! Oh-h-h! Oh-h-h!"

Machine guns spat up at all the windows.

Chernysh was lying in the corner, next to the wall. He came to for a moment and asked for a drink. His lips were parched, they stuck together, and he could barely open them. Blazhenko asked leave to go down and look for water. In the hall upstairs, it was still light; but as he descended the tortuous staircases, it got darker and darker. Finally he reached the cellar; the door was ajar, and a streak of light was coming through. Going in, Roman found himself in a long, low, gloomy place, with a ceiling like a tomb. It was piled haphazardly with bundles and furniture. There was a candle burning on a

little table; and in a big armchair beside it, a grey-haired Hungarian sat in deep reverie. On seeing the soldier, he turned a puffy face with a grizzled goatee.

"You are still here?" he asked.

"Water!" Roman said and made signs as if he were drinking. "Water!"

The old man picked up a small bronze bust from the table and held it up, saying with solemn pride:

"Kossuth!"

Roman confused this with "*tessék*,"* which he knew, and replied:

"No, I don't want that! Water, see? Water!" And again he made drinking signs.

But the Hungarian was haranguing him about something instead, angrily mixing in Russian, German and Slovak words. Since he'd set foot on foreign soil, Roman had developed a remarkable knack of catching the general drift of strange languages and signs; and from the old man's tale he gathered that here too there had been a revolution once, and this greybeard's ancestor had been an officer of the revolution and had been killed fighting the armies of Tsar Miklos.** And that the old Count had decided he wasn't going to leave the family mansion, where the revolutionaries of *Magyarország**** had used to gather and where the glorious spirit of his rebel ancestors lived on.

"*Háború nem jó!*"**** the old man wound up; but he made no move to bring out any water, so Roman went to look for it himself.

He came upon all kinds of things that he had never seen before, twiddled them about in his hands, then put them aside; while the old man followed him about with

* Please.

** Nicholas I.

*** Hungary.

**** War is bad.

his eyes, marvelling that this strange soldier did not take his property. In a far corner behind a pile of feather beds, Roman at last found what he wanted. There was a glass jar standing there, with some preserved cherries. He picked it up, walked over to the table and handed it to the old man:

"Drink, Count." He was afraid the stuff might be poisoned. "Drink. . . . *Tessék*."

The Count drank.

"Stop now! That's enough!"

Roman took the jar. On his way out, he paused for a moment in the doorway. He knew well enough what was ahead of him.

"Look here, Magyar . . . if they do us in . . . you know --*kaput* . . . mind you bury us! See?"

He explained with signs. The Hungarian nodded agreement.

The hall upstairs was full of smoke. Wounded men groaned on the floor; there was a whole hospital of them by now. Sagaida said they should go downstairs for greater safety, but they wouldn't. They wanted to be with the others to the last, and pressed about him in one bloodstained mass. Sagaida was secretly glad that they were here with him, all together.

Through puddles of blood, Blazhenko crawled towards Chernysh. Bullets bored into the wall above his head and bits of plaster went down his neck. The men stood motionless by the windows. They weren't shooting, for the Germans were afraid by now to show in sight.

Outside, the weather was clearing, the grey sky in the west had turned blue.

"Should be fine tomorrow, by the sunset," Roman noted.

Chernysh, bare to the waist, lay quietly, as if he were resting. His head was swathed in a turban of gauze. White bandages crossed on his naked chest. His long face

seemed longer still, his chin had sharpened, the high colour had drained from his brown cheeks. His thin dry lips were tightly compressed.

"Comrade Lieutenant...."

Chernysh stared unblinking at the wall opposite and did not hear.

Bullets pecked at the wall, which glowed in the setting sun. A large gold-framed picture swayed on its cord: a Hungarian knight on a fine white charger beating off a lot of red-jacketed Turks. And unseen birds pecked at them all, and they swayed there.

"Comrade Lieutenant.... Comrade Lieutenant...."

Chernysh frowned, withdrew his eyes with an effort from the picture and gave Roman a disapproving look. Roman forced the edge of the jar between his hard lips; Chernysh took a few gulps and sighed.

"Where's Bryansky? ... Where's Sagaida?"

Sagaida and Volgin were trying to fix up the transmitter in the opposite corner. The radio-operator, wounded in both arms, lay beside them, telling them what to do.

"Send me to the dressing station," Chernysh said firmly. "I'm wounded."

Just then somebody at a window cried:

"They're coming on!"

The men opened up furiously from their tommy guns. Empty cartridge cases clinked on the floor.

"Why do they shoot?" Chernysh frowned. "Oh, why do they shoot?... It hurts my ears."

A troop carrier ground across the yard outside, and tracer bullets came flying into the hall like shreds of lightning. The Germans were shouting again. Chernysh's eyes dilated.

"So then they're all around?"

Roman only sighed in reply.

The sun sank down behind the distant mountains, and the wall glowed no longer; the Turks' jackets turned

a deeper red, and the gallant knight was darker too. Only the white charger pranced on the canvas as before.

All of a sudden an accordion struck up somewhere in the interior of the house, and they heard a voice singing. The effect was petrifying: it was so crazy, so incongruous, that song breaking into the grim firing and the general tension.

*Oh, I have roamed the wide world over,
And nowhere did I my darling find!*

The preposterous singing approached, gaining in volume. A stocky bow-legged soldier appeared in the doorway, his blouse unbuttoned and the medal on it askew; in his hands was a mother-of-pearl accordion. He grinned a huge grin of unconcern, as if he didn't care a hang about what was happening.

"That's that!" he exclaimed, stopping his playing. "All—up! . . . This is—where we—t—turn up our toes!"

Every eye in the hall was fixed on him.

"Liquor—down b-below! . . . Brothers! Pals! . . . I say—drink it up! The whole keg, right down to the bottom! And then—a grenade under your feet! . . . Let the b-beastly Fritzes see—how Russians can die! . . . Let all of Europe. . . ."

"Shut up, you skunk!" A wounded man poked a bearded face around the corner of the piano. "This isn't a circus, to be showing off. That's not what we were sent here for!"

Deep furrows lined Sagaida's forehead. He left the transmitter, walked up to the man, and stood for a few moments looking him silently up and down.

"Men," he said hoarsely. "Look at this fellow. He's a deserter. Oh yes, you're with us still, but you're a traitor and deserter all the same. Did you take the oath?"

"Several times, Comrade Lieutenant!" the fellow said, standing up straight.

"And what does the oath say? It says to hold on to

your dying breath! To your dying breath, wherever you are, whatever the circumstances. . . . To hold on and fight for your country, tooth and nail! . . . To be worthy of your great historic mission! . . .”

“Worthy—historic mission!” The man saluted, still holding the accordion in one hand.

“The nations of Europe await us.” Sagaida was summoning up the words he had heard many a time. “We have been sent to liberate them.”

“Liberate—Europe!” the fellow echoed again. He was quite firm on his feet.

“Shut up!” Sagaida barked. “Drunken swine!”

And he turned back to the others:

“We’ve got no court-martial here. We’re our own court-martial! What are we going to do with him?”

“Throw him out!” the men chorused. “Sling him out of the window!”

They grudged a bullet for him now—ammunition was scarce.

At this moment the hollow-cheeked machine gunner posted at the main entrance came crawling through the doorway. His breeches were undone, he was holding them up with one hand, and for a moment Sagaida thought he too was drunk.

“It got me,” the machine gunner said quietly.

He sat up on the floor, leaning against the doorjamb, and with one hand lifted his dirty shirt; the other hand, all smeared with blood, he kept on his belly. Leaning over him, Sagaida gave an involuntary shudder: a jagged wound gaped beneath the man’s fingers.

“Anybody else a machine gunner around here?” he asked, without wasting any time.

“I am,” said the bow-legged fellow.

“You’re drunk.”

“Lieutenant! I’m not drunk ! . . . I’m . . . I’m just a fool! I’m going.”

Sagaida thought for a moment and looked him over again. The man stood there, serious and steady enough.

"Sergeant Kolomiets!" Sagaida called. Kolomiets was a Headquarters signalsman whom he had known ever since the Donets fighting and had now detailed to place the posts. "Take him to that post!"

"Yes, Comrade Lieutenant."

"And keep an eye on him: shoot him if he falls asleep."

The man stood the accordion carefully in a corner, and the two went off. The wounded machine gunner bit his chapped lips to keep from groaning, and he was feeling his belly all the time. Sagaida said they should dress his wound.

"Don't," the machine gunner said, strangely calm. "We're short... of dressings.... And it won't do me any good... anyway...."

He made a sign for Sagaida to bend down. Sagaida bent to his bristly sunken cheek and they kissed solemnly, once, and twice, and a third time.

The man raised a grey face with big eyes.

"Comrade Lieutenant...."

"Yes?"

"Forgive me!..."

Sagaida felt hot all over. He knew what the soldier was trying to say.

"Forget it!"

"No, forgive me, forgive me...."

XXVI

Kazakov lay at the entrance to the house, the drum of his tommy gun resting on the doorstep. Next to him, by the other leaf of the door, the bow-legged soldier was stretched out at the machine gun. Along the wall stood grenades, with the fuses in. When Sergeant Kolomiets had brought this short, measly fellow to replace the

wounded machine gunner, Kazakov hadn't thought much of him: a flea! This was a sorry substitute for the other man, who had impressed even Kazakov with his uncanny proficiency, and whom the sergeant—a young fellow—had addressed affectionately as "Pa." But the bow-legged drunk had settled down to the machine gun as if he'd been lying there all the time. And as the action progressed, Kazakov's first impression of him changed more and more. The fellow had uncommonly clever hands, every movement was confident and assured—he was obviously used to handling a machine gun. Stationed at this danger post, he had pulled himself together, had sobered fast enough, and was bossing about his No. 2, who was handing up the drums.

"Get a move on . . . drunken pig!" he shouted, though the other was as sober as they come.

At the faintest sound of movement or of gear rattling in the dark yard, he sent a swift burst in its direction. When he was firing, all of him compressed and expanded like a spring to the machine gun's rhythm, as if not just his hands, but the whole of his short, tough body were doing the shooting.

Kazakov knew by himself how danger transforms a man. He had experienced it many a time in going out on a night patrol, when any sluggishness or torpor he might have been feeling had vanished instantly and his taut nerves had sent a resilient vitality racing through his body. It had come home to him then what a tremendous strength man has in him, himself unaware of it at ordinary times; it awakens only in the face of mortal danger, when the muscles and will not of one, but of a hundred strong men seem suddenly united in one frame and seek an outlet. That was what happened to Kazakov now too, and perhaps that was why, lying in that doorway, he was so certain he wouldn't be killed. This strange certainty had not left him even at the most desperate moments

in his soldiering. To be wounded, stunned, maimed—that he could picture, because he had been through it already; but to disappear altogether, not to exist—no, that couldn't happen.

Beyond the manor grounds, over by the railway, rockets flared in the sky. It was queer to think of Germans moving, making noises, firing rockets between him, Kazakov, and his regiment. He had a feeling every now and then as if it weren't he that was surrounded here, trapped in this dark hole; no, it was the Fritzes that were surrounded, because the regiment was speaking to Kazakov, was shooting, was alive. His regiment! How could he, Kazakov, the eternal soldier, exist without his regiment? It was impossible, unthinkable. Each time he fired, he knew for a certainty that the regiment heard his shots. It heard them, same as when he was out with the boys on a sortie behind the enemy lines, and the whole regiment, ready to drive ahead, would listen to the rumpus they were raising inside the Nazi defences. And Old Man Samiyev, their fiery boss, listening in the night, would rap out in his quick way:

"It's the 'wolves,' the 'wolves' getting busy! Good lads! Pass on the word to get the infantry moving!"

Kazakov recalled how, in between the fighting, the Old Man used to rag him and make him walk "civvy-style." "What's the matter with you, Kazakov, that you're forever crouching, creeping, padding about? . . . Straighten up, man, try a peacetime walk. imagine you're out on a boulevard somewhere, stepping out with a girl! . . ." And Kazakov did try to walk that way, and couldn't—in spite of himself, he slunk along in a furtive, wolfish fashion, and the others laughed: "The sergeant's got the wolf in his legs, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel!"

Remembering this scene, Kazakov somehow felt warmer in the cold dark night. "Good old regiment! As long as I'm with you, I'm all right! . . ."

He turned to the machine gunner next to him:

"What do you think, old bandy-legs, will we hold out?"

" 'Course we will! We'll settle their hash, and no mistake! . . ."

And he slipped on a new drum with a click.

In the hall it was dark, and Roman, picking his way to take his turn at the window, was afraid he'd step on some of the wounded. He happened to pass his hand over the piano keys, and the bass notes rumbled like voices from the grave. Planted by the window, with the biting wind bursting in, Roman leant sideways against the wall and peered out into the yard.

Stars spangled the sky. Darkness, deep and cold, had engulfed the world, and there was no breaking through it, no soaring over it. The wind moaned, rocking the sky and obscurity; stars fell, dropping into the lap of some luckier man, a long way off. "The sand has covered up my true love's tracks. . . ." He had been a young lad once, had sat with a girl under a moonlit bush of guelder-roses. Was that true, or had he dreamt it? And now? Now he was here, in this desolate steppe under strange stars, with the wind scattering the ashes from the fires—look how the sparks were glowing!—and here he, a fisherman from the Bug, would perhaps end his days. No use fooling himself; he wasn't a child, he could look the bitter truth in the face.

The Germans seemed to have quieted down. The troop carriers stood silent, motionless, like huge black coffins. But of course they hadn't forgotten out there that the house was full of Red Army men. Making plans, most likely; their fine officers were figuring out how to shorten the days of Blazhenko and his pals, to leave his Alena alone with the little ones over above the green Bug. Other women's menfolk would be coming home from the wars; and she would shade her eyes against the

sun and scan and scan the dusty road—but he would never come. Denis would come home, maybe—that he at least might live through it!—and he'd tell the folks about Roman. Denis was joining the Party now—he'd be *kolkhoz* chairman for sure, after the war. He'd tell them about Roman—how he had fought the Germans, trapped somewhere in Transylvania and had died with honour, as a soldier should. They'd put out a glass for Roman too, but it would stay undrained. His lovely Bug! What a long way he was from it now!

Bit by bit, he looked back over his life—had everything been as it should be? Once in a while he addressed someone mentally:

“Kinsman Dorosh! Forgive my raiding your nets that day. Those were sore times for me, and the fish just wouldn't catch in mine!...”

Whenever a shadow flitted across the yard, he took aim carefully and sent a bullet out.

And again he thought back, and remembered, and hoped. And when he pictured how they would lie here, blown to pieces by their own last grenades, he saw nothing unnatural in it. How could it be otherwise? Anyway, it was better than being burnt alive under some haystack.... And he had seen, after that night engagement when they won the pass, a row of our soldiers lying, all charred, beside a pile of burnt hay. They'd been captured.... Yes, they were up against it here, it was no use dodging, got to stand and face the music. He was counting every cartridge now, like a miser, and taking aim so's not to waste a single one of them. The time was long past when he used to fire blindly, putting up his carbine on the parapet and hiding his head, like an ostrich. Oh, yes, there'd been such a time; he didn't mind owning to it now, in what was perhaps his last minute. But now he wasn't like that any more. Coming over those Alps had been like going through a furnace, it had tem-

pered and hardened him, had made a real soldier of him, that fought the enemy without hanging back! Take aim so you don't miss, Roman!

Only it hurt him to think that the old Count wouldn't bury them properly, wouldn't plant guelder-roses at their heads. And he wanted so badly to leave something behind him, if only a bush of whispering guelder-roses. It would have told Roman's thoughts to the winds, and the winds would have carried them East, across the Alps.... True, our lads would be coming here soon.... Denis would come... he would seek out his brother's body and bury it....

Roman rummaged in his pockets till he felt a greasy metal cleaning-rod, then he turned to the wall and scratched on it in the dark.

"Brother Denis," he scratched, "all of us here with Lieutenant Sagaida...."

He puzzled for a long time, casting about for the right words. He thought of the fighting in the mountains, of Bryansky and what he'd said to them just before he was killed. And he scratched on:

"...stood and died...."

The flakes of plaster fell on somebody below, and they swore up at him from the floor:

"What are you gnawing at the wall for?"

"He's crazed with hunger, that's what!"

Roman put the rod away. He felt better now. In his pocket, his hand came upon a filmy silk kerchief. When he still hoped to return home one day, he had stowed it away to give to his little girl. The fabric flowed softly under his rough fingers, like the waters of the gentle Bug. It flowed and flowed, until at last he held the kerchief outside the window and let the wind carry it away. He had no need of anything any more! He felt now as if, for the last time of all, he'd washed and changed into clean clothes. Nothing unnecessary in his pockets,

only the cartridges. Roman fingered them, counted them. . . .

Counted them like a miser. . . .

A shadow darted by in the glow of the embers outside, and Roman took aim.

"We've done it!" Sagaida's bass called excitedly from the dark corner. "We've fixed it, boys! . . . It's working! . . ."

They had got the transmitter to operate.

In the regiment, strung out along the railway, the thrilling news went flashing over the wires: they had communication with the manor!

And in the mortar company, Makoveichik shouted, dancing with elation:

"I knew they hadn't given in!"

The manor gave them a target. That target was—itself.

Straight from the general, the gunners got the order not to spare the ammunition. They hauled and hauled shells all night, the supply men didn't sleep at all. Sagaida's mortars also stood ready for action. Their crews were beside them as before, though thinned in the recent fighting. Only it wasn't Sagaida's hoarse orders that they heard now, but the gruff voice of Denis Blazhenko—as the most experienced of the N.C.O.'s, he had assumed command of the company. Denis went about his new duties confidently, he knew them well. Ever since the evening he had had the mortars trained on the various sections of the manor grounds, and on the house itself, which was now Target No. 1 in the fire-table.

Lighting up the dial sights with cigarettes and flashlights, they were making a final check on the range. Denis paced sombrely up and down; and Khayetsky, whom he'd appointed his orderly, watched him as eagerly as Shovkun used to watch Bryansky, ready to rush and do anything he might say. They were all seasoned troops by now, and the grim ways of soldiering were part of their flesh and blood.

Denis knew already who of their battalion was in the trap, and every now and then he would stare fixedly in the direction of the manor, as if hoping to see his brother there. Maybe Roman was firing from somewhere in the attic; maybe the first bomb discharged at Denis' order would land plumb on his window. But even if Denis had known for certain that it would be so, he felt he would have given the order without a moment's hesitation. This was war, and the manor was the target. And when at last the salvo roared and the bombs sped from the barrels, whirring upward, Denis clenched his fists. "Here are letters for you, brother! I'm sending you these flaming letters!" Eyes glued on the manor, he slashed the air:

"Five quick ones—fire! Fire! Fire!..."

And when, amid the ceaseless explosions, the white columns of the manor house shone out, Denis felt as if he did see his brother, who rose in the gloom of that steppe, no longer a simple fisherman from the Bug, but a mighty, invincible warrior.

XXVII

When the shells started bursting in the yard, everybody in the hall wanted to look out. Wounded men lifted their heads, raised themselves on their elbows, drank in the fitful gleams of red in the windows, heedless of the bullets that pelted on the walls above them.

The thunder, and the magic river of light that was winding through the hall all of a sudden, seemed to bring Chernysh out of his heavy stupor: the red Janissaries capered gaily on the wall; the white charger, arching his neck, kept disappearing in the shadows with his rider and reappearing at each flash outside.

"'Cruiser' calling, 'Cruiser' calling! Can you hear me? Can you hear me? ... Over to you, over to you. This is Volgin sending...."

"It won't hole these walls!" somebody said confidently. "It oughtn't to hole them!"

The armed men, crowded round the windows, stood there grim and intent. Two of the troop carriers were already ablaze in the yard. The others started up their engines, crawling off.

" 'Cruiser' calling, 'Cruiser' calling! Can you hear me? Can you hear me? Over to you. . . ."

Cruiser? What cruiser? With flaming ears, Chernysh heard the floor jolting and vibrating dully under him, the way a ship does in a storm. Where was he sailing, and why was it so blinding and so hot? The boiling sea was raging, lashing at him with hot waves. . . . Now he was sailing over sands in the hot deserts of Asia. A caravan was out on a long expedition. Blades of grass wilted helplessly in the sun; flocks of sheep roamed, heads down, in search of a watering place. And before them shuffled shepherds in dry, wrinkled slippers and pointed Rumanian hats.

And now he was under some leafy trees, with lots of people sitting around on rugs and drinking out of transparent cups. Drinking and laughing and talking, very friendly, and among them he saw Bryansky, only Bryansky wasn't Bryansky any more, but the leader of the caravan. His head was shaven and he wore a striped gown—and talked Hungarian for some reason. A girl with black braids threw back her veil, and Chernysh discovered she was the Gypsy from Alba Julia that had wanted to tell his fortune. She looked at him affectionately, like his mother, stroked his hot cheek with her brown hand and whispered: "Such beautiful mountains, these Alps!" Now an old Gypsy fiddler was playing *Katyusha*, and he, Chernysh, was dancing with the children, and then all of them were whirling in a dance under the green trees; and the loud talk and laughter merged in one medley of sound and colour, it

wove into a fantastic web of lace, and he felt there must be people here from every nation in the world. And above the confusion of all the different languages, languages that he knew and that he didn't, there rang the laughter, the same in all tongues and intelligible to all.

Gladsome and light of heart, he looked up at the dome of the sky, and it was no longer the sky, but a great blue clock-face, and revolving on it were giant hands that looked like stony roads. Feeling himself a titan who could do anything, Chernysh commanded:

"Khayetsky! Turn that road around! Turn it west! That's right! Sight 666!..."

"He's raving," someone said close by. Chernysh tried to raise himself on his elbow, and saw the hall, light and dark by turns, and men with arms glinting ominously in their hands.

"Who's raving?" he asked sternly, and slumped back on the fire that they'd put under his head for a pillow.

Again he heard the deep voices and distant laughter. They came from somewhere up above, as from the gallery of a lofty cathedral, and he was climbing a fire-hot cliff to reach them. Looking down, he saw some queer wells below, with the water barely visible. Where had he seen them before, and when? He remembered: as a little boy he used to drop pebbles down these wells; it was ages before they reached the water and made that nice splash. They splashed and started talking:

"Your Honour!... Your Honour!..."

"So it's you?" Chernysh scanned the fellow's face searchingly. "It's you, is it? What do you want? I haven't got your horse any more. Haven't got it. Speak up! Where have you been?"

"I haven't been anywhere," said Roman, picking his way through to Chernysh. "I was on duty."

"Duty? Duty?" Chernysh repeated in a fevered whisper. "Where are you on duty?"

"By the third window, Comrade Lieutenant."

"Window? Why window? What window? Oh, it's up there... on the hill.... I can see it from here. Who are you? But you were killed!"

He closed his eyes in horror, and again somebody was calling:

"Your Honour!..."

"Shut up! There's your horse! Look!"

And he pointed to the wall, to an unending pitted road on which troops waded up to their knees in mud, with their overcoats tucked up out of the dirt; lorries and tanks were struggling along the road, and out of the ditch climbed a white horse with its breast blasted away; the redjackets weren't around any more, and the young knight wasn't on its back. The creature pressed its hoof against the bottom of the muddy ditch, and tried painfully to raise its white swan-neck, but the neck drooped powerlessly and sank back into the mud, and the horse groaned and wept and implored:

"Stop it! Stop it! Stop! Stop!"

But the troops tramped past, the feet of endless armies churned the mud, guns crawled, tanks and tractors clanged, and nobody took any notice of the swan-horse, everyone passed on, leaving it in that roadside ditch.

"Good work, good work," Sagaida was saying exultantly at the transmitter. "Two are alight already, you've snuffed out two of 'em. Keep up the fire, boys, keep up the fire...."

"I don't want any fire!" Chernysh cried, struggling to get up. "I'm lying on fire as it is! Solid fire!"

"Keep up the fire!" Sagaida chanted eagerly at the other end of the hall. "Keep up the fire!"

XXVIII

The dull force that shook the great house brought the old Count to his feet too; picking up the candle, he hobbled slowly upstairs.

In the doorway at the top he halted, not daring to enter his own hall. Tracer bullets burst in hissing at all the windows, as though the wind were driving in a rattling fiery rain. And strange men armed with strange weapons flanked the windows on either side, with the gleams from the explosions dancing blood-red on their pale faces and their coats, as though on the armour of knights of old. The Count's long-past rebel youth seemed to have come back to his house, to his proud family mansion.

The men fired without cease, the hall filled with hubbub, smoke and grime. Now that the troop carriers besieging the house had been driven off by the gunfire, the enemy was attacking in wave after wave, bent on breaking in, afraid that his prey would slip out of his clutches. With glinting, narrowed eyes and parched lips, the men stood at their posts, firing with deliberation at living targets alone. Nobody paid any attention to the old Count.

"Korolyov!" a soldier by the window shouted to some wounded man. "You got my drum?"

"I'm filling for Mostovoi."

"Where's mine, then? Who's got my drum?" the soldier demanded; as many of the wounded as could manage it were filling drums and clips. "Hey, old long-beard, you got my drum?"

The Count didn't understand the language, and he didn't understand these men and their dogged tenacity. One of the wounded, catching sight of him, shouted peevishly from behind the piano:

"What are you standing there goggling? And what's

that candle for? Thinking to bury us, were you? You've come too soon, brother...."

"Oh, he can't see by our light, so he's brought his own...."

There was indeed no need here for the Count's candle—it was light as noonday without: two troop carriers were ablaze before the windows. The leaping flames filled the hall as with the flapping of thousands of soundless wings. And the strange knights stood there in their grey, as if hewn out of stone, amazing the old Hungarian by their unfathomable courage. A wounded man came limping from the passage, carrying bundles of German cartridges in the upturned hem of his coat. The Germans had left a lot of them below, and now men with captured weapons were using them liberally.

"What d'you want to park here for, you old fogey?" he snapped. "Can't you see you're in the way? Get either in or out." And he pushed the Count aside, licking his dry lips.

The Count nodded eagerly and set off down the stairs, mumbling something to himself.

Before very long, he reappeared in the doorway with a jar of preserved fruit. The wounded grabbed at it from every side, ready to tear it to pieces. The old man stood there, bewildered, and in the meantime a close-cropped fellow with his collar up was already putting the jar to his lips.

"One gulp apiece!" he said, gulping and passing it on.

"A gulp apiece!" they all shouted; everybody was suddenly aware of an intolerable thirst.

"Leave some for the officer!" Roman cried.

But there wasn't enough to go round even at one gulp apiece, and they turned upon the Count as if he were to blame for everything.

"Dish out some more, you old tight-fist!"

"Only made us thirstier than ever!"

"Bring it out, you wretch!"

That much the Count understood, and he stumped down again to the cellar.

When he came back this time, Roman intercepted him in the doorway and piloted him over to where Chernysh was lying.

Chernysh took a drink, and the acrid smoke, the nauseating smell of blood, the shaking of the whole house no longer addled his consciousness. His mind cleared. Clutched convulsively in his hand he felt a small F-1 grenade. In one of his more lucid moments he had taken it stealthily from the man lying next to him, and had hidden it under him. He hid it like a thief so that Blazhenko shouldn't see. It was charged, the little corrugated thing—it would be his saviour. Chernysh's whole life was centred now in that grenade, and he gripped it, that life, in his palm. If everything should be over, if alien talk were to sound under this dark roof and alien boots came clumping around him, he would just pull out the pin, the last grenade-pin in his life. So he didn't worry and felt calm, almost safe.

"Comrade Lieutenant," somebody said to Sagaida. "The machine gunner's dead. He isn't breathing any more."

"Carry him out into the passage."

The shells dropped and dropped, they came zooming down from above, and for a moment Sagaida stopped to look at them. He had a sudden fancy that they were coming from somewhere far, far away, where somebody was thinking about him. As if their country itself were saluting its sons out here, thousands of miles from home, showering them with fiery red blossoms.

"Wonder what the communiqué is today," Volgin said, squatting by the transmitter. "What do you think, Sagaida? Suppose we ask them, hey?"

"The Old Man won't like it."

"Will it say about us, do you suppose?"

"What are you, joking? This . . . this is just a minor episode!"

A minor episode! Sagaida didn't really think that. Before, when he had been fighting alongside of Bryansky, he hadn't stopped to think much about the meaning of his work, about his role in the war as a whole. He had relied on Bryansky, as it were, to do all the thinking for him, and his job was only to salute and rush through thick and thin to carry out his orders. Now, when circumstances had compelled him to shoulder an unaccustomed weight, the weight of responsibility for all those lives and for the fate of this bastion, he saw everything in its wider, deeper implications. He pictured the whole huge front from the north of Norway to the Balkans, where his country's armies were battling ceaselessly against the foe. And one little patch in that thousand-kilometre line of steel was this "Cruiser" of his. Of course, even if it did fall and Sagaida and the rest blew themselves up with their last grenades, it would make hardly any difference. But was that really so? Wasn't it little "Cruisers" like this, that fought and held out from day to day—wasn't it they that made up the great onward sweep to the glorious day that would have the name of Victory? A minor episode! All right, his name wouldn't be in the communiqué. But men needed him like the very air, else why had the wounded machine gunner looked up like that into his eyes and begged to be forgiven because Sagaida had had to strike him?

Kazakov came rushing up the stairs, tommy gun in hand:

"Comrade Lieutenant! There's tanks rumbling. . . . Flares! . . . It looks like our boys are charging!"

Sagaida jumped up and the two of them clattered

down the stairs to the main entrance. The black field beyond the manor grounds was alive with flares and tracer bullets, it roared and groaned, as though some irresistible immortal force were rolling onward over the rain-washed earth.

XXIX

The hum of the engines grew.

The outlines of the buildings in the yard were becoming more and more distinct in the murk of the pale September dawn. They were lower than the evening before, because the burning roofs had caved in; and it made the whole yard, quiet and empty now, seem different from yesterday. You had a feeling of more room, more sky.

The sounds of the fighting were approaching from the fields on either side of the manor; the roar of the engines swelled, and now a party of German soldiers dashed out from behind a burnt cowshed.

"Panzer, panzer!" they yelled, and rushed blindly across the yard, heads down.

Mud squirted from under their feet, although they seemed to be running over solid ground. The green groundsheets on their shoulders were plainly visible now.

Frantic with terror, they were making straight for the house.

"Ready!" Kazakov rapped out to his mate, himself motionless with expectancy: their quarry was coming right at them.

"I'm opening up!"

"Hold on! . . . We'll get them alive! . . . What the hell! Let them rebuild Stalingrad!"

At this moment one of our tanks swung at top speed around the same cowshed, machine guns blazing away.

The bullets rang on the stone steps and ricocheted, hissing. Kazakov turned away his head. When he looked again, the tank, ploughing the mud as a ship does the waves, was pushing on into the field, shreds of the green groundsheets on its clanking caterpillar-tracks.

A German shell whizzed past overhead and burst somewhere close by. And from behind the charred, sooty walls, our men poured in—our good old greycoats!—and made straight for the house. Kazakov and the machine gunner rushed out to meet them. It was hard to step over that threshold, on which they had lain, rigid, through that hellish night; but once he was over it, Kazakov ran without feeling the ground under him, unable even to call out, because his voice stuck in his throat and tears dimmed eyes to which they were all but strangers. He grabbed the first infantryman that came to hand—a little snub-nosed fellow, beaming all over his face—picked him up bodily and hugged him with all his might.

“You devils!” was all he managed to say, and he tweaked the lad’s ear in a way that made him squeal.

Green Rumanian coats showed among ours—the Rumanians had also taken part in the attack. A company commander whom Kazakov knew ran by in a leather coat, calling briskly:

“Follow me! Follow me!”

The infantry swept right through the manor grounds, reloading as they went. The tank engines were humming further and further off, the voices receded more and more, the chattering of enemy machine guns grew fainter and fainter. Back in the open once more, the men who had stuck it out in the house were rejoining their companies as they ran. The ravaged manor and this shell-scarred house did indeed remain only a more or less memorable fighting episode. Beyond

the manor, rolling grey plains opened before them, with ponds glinting like metal here and there and green trees lining the roads. And still further west, the mountains rose again, with low feathery clouds sailing over them and shrouding the peaks.

Stretcher-bearers came into the house and started taking down the killed and wounded to the ground floor. Some additional wounded that had just been picked up outside—our own men and Rumanians—were brought here too. They were waiting now for the ambulance carts to arrive.

Hauling the wounded out of the hall, his feet slipping on bloody cartridge cases, one of the stretcher-bearers called another's attention to the wall by the window:

"Say, Kashirin, there's something scratched on here. . . .

*"Brother Denis,
all of us here
with Lieutenant Sagaida
stood and died."*

They deciphered the inscription slowly. And already it sounded to them like something secret and ancient, that had been written by some different order of being, not by these ordinary men, their own messmates.

XXX

The mortarmen came striding through the manor-grounds, barrels on their shoulders, and Sagaida went out to meet them, like a living man come safe through hell.

"Comrade Lieutenant," Denis Blazhenko reported, standing straighter than ever. "The company carried on as usual while you were gone."

And only then, eyes turned away, did he ask in a quiet, controlled voice about his brother.

"He's alive," Sagaida reassured him. "Just got his whiskers a bit singed. He's turning the junior lieutenant over to the medics, then he'll be catching up."

"I knew they'd never get you!" Makoveichik carolled. Sagaida repaid with a "maul."

Then he sought out the battalion commander and made his own report: Platoon Commander Chernysh had been wounded, he said, but apart from that nothing of note had occurred. The battalion commander put his arms silently around him, they went on together.

"Is Chernysh . . . very bad?"

"Bullet wounds . . . in the head and side."

"Will he pull through?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Hope so! . . . Nice fellow."

They came out into the fields. Our tanks and self-propelled guns had left their tracks on the faded grass, like a multitude of new roads. The mortar-men, strung out in a line, trudged with the bipods and metal base-plates on their backs, looking as if they were clad in armour.

First to trundle up to the house was a flat, open Rumanian ambulance cart. Remembering what Sagaida had said, Roman insisted on his officer being transported first. Bandaged and bloody, Chernysh was brought out and laid on the cart, next to a Rumanian sergeant, who had evidently been hit in the lungs, for blood oozed from his mouth and nostrils.

"Blazhenko," Chernysh called weakly. "Take this. . . ." Opening his dry palm, he showed the grenade. "And where's the map-case?"

"I've got it," said Roman, and he fastened Bryansky's map-case to the belt around Chernysh's waist.

Artillerymen were moving their guns across the yard, the horses pressing their muscular breasts into their collars. The 1st Battalion's mortar company went past,

horses carrying Bryansky pack-saddles. Anxious signalmen with reels of wire on their chests were stringing the line forward. Kitchen orderlies with thermos-containers on their backs asked everybody if the infantry were far ahead. The containers, full of hot *borshch*, were burning their backs, the sweat streamed down their faces, and still they couldn't catch up with their outfits.

"They're over there!" people told them, pointing past the manor to the field rutted with tank and gun tracks, like numberless parallel roads.

"Where did No. 5 Company go to?"

"Where's No. 3?"

"They're all there! Here's the marker...."

And sure enough, some prompt sapper had already scratched an "L" on the steel-pocked wall of the house, and an imperious arrow, like the outflung arm of a leader, was pointing to the West. And there the Alps rose again, their summits disappearing in the clouds.

PART TWO

THE BLUE DANUBE

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I

THE LORRIES raced down the mountainside.

It was early evening on a fine autumn day in October. The speckled woods clothing the slopes on either side of the road, far from losing their brilliance in the slanting rays of the setting sun, blazed even brighter than in the daytime.

Shura Yasnogorskaya stood in the lorry, holding on to the roof of the cab, and laughed at the golden woods that slid past, at the road that rushed to meet her. The whole earth was a rustling red and gold.

By a brook in a little glade, a marching company had halted to rest. Fine leaves dropping from the yellowed trees fell on the soldiers' sweating shoulders. One of the men, throwing off his pack, happened to lift his head and stood for a moment, spellbound.... What had he seen there? On the very top of the hill, the ruins of an ancient castle were outlined; and through the gaps in the walls, the sunlight was streaming.

All the way to the horizon, the Transylvanian autumn was a golden blaze.

Why was the world so extraordinarily good, festive, friendly today? And the men's wrinkled boots were not

scraping on grey stone, but rustling over such perfect beauty carpeting the earth! And the prints they left were so clean! Company after company, company after company.... Rustle on, good old boots that never wear out! You squelched over the sticky black earth of the Ukraine. You turned white on the limestone of Bessarabia, and red as copper in the clay of Rumania. Rustle on! You have deserved to tread these carpets.

The lorries flew, as though into fairyland. The wind gave greeting: Shu... shu... shu... Shura... Shura... The wind was whispering her name—it was wafting Yuri's voice to her, from over beyond the Tisza, where the cannonade sounded dully. Fly on, lorries, fly on! Rush on, high mountain road, towards happiness!

Happiness! It had come out of the blue, as it always does. Shura had expected it in letters from Minsk; and all the time it was right here, next to her, in her own base hospital, in Maxillary Ward No. 9. How had it all been? She had tarried in the ward, talking to a sergeant from her own part of the country. In the corner, whiskered Shovkun was having a discussion about mountain warfare with the fellow in the next bed. Shovkun! Darling Shovkun with his bound-up jaw! How hadn't she noticed before that he had such a nice face, such gentle, thoughtful eyes? Whenever Shura came into the ward, he used to duck under his blanket and stay there until she had gone: he was ashamed of his undress hospital appearance. The men ragged him about it, and Shura used to join in.... And it was from under these bashful whiskers, combed out carefully with a soldier's improvised comb, that the words came which made her start! "Bryansky saddles!" In his mild, calm way, Shovkun was saying something about mountain marches. Bryansky saddles! Shura stood there, scarcely breathing, her conversation with the sergeant left hanging in mid-air. She was afraid—suppose she had only imagined it?

"What was that you said, Shovkun?"

"Huh?"

"About those saddles . . . who . . . what saddles?"

"Oh, the saddles. . . . Lieutenant Bryansky's invention, they were, our company commander's."

"Bryansky's?"

"That's right. He thought them up himself when we switched to packs. And then all the other regiments—"

"No, no, that's not what I meant, Shovkun! Tell me, what's his given name . . . your Bryansky's? Please?"

Waiting for the answer, she raised her small hands slowly to her breast, as though she meant to clutch the word, the way she might clutch a bird.

"His given name? Hm. . . . Let me see now . . . what was it they called each other? Oh yes: Yuri—Yuri, that was it."

"Yuras!"

"No, Yuri."

"Yuras! Yuras! Yuras!"—she repeated the dear diminutive.

She swelled with happiness like a burgeoning bud in springtime. All at once the tears gushed out. She fell on Shovkun's chest, laughing and crying and begging:

"Say some more, say some more!"

"What do you want me to say? I don't know any more." He looked at her, embarrassed, his cheeks burnt. And the other fellows made it worse than ever by shouting to him to kiss her while he had the chance.

"Go on talking, Shovkun, go on! . . . Tell me everything, everything! . . . What's it like for him out there? What does he look like now?"

"Well . . . he's a quick little fair-haired chap. . . . Never unkind to a fellow without reason. . . . A real good sort, he is. . . ."

"Where did you see him last?"

"Ever hear of Hill 805? That miserable hill? A regu-

lar Mt. Ararat! Did for a lot of our boys. . . . When I got hit, I stopped in at the mortar-post on the way down: talked to the lieutenant. And he says to me, 'When you're all better,' he says, 'you come back to us. Always be glad to have you.' I was his orderly, you know."

Shovkun knew everything Shura wanted to hear about. Listening to him, she recognized her Yuras; he was just the same as forty months ago. Reserved—and tender underneath; stubborn; just in everything, down to the last trifle. . . . Forever thinking out ways to improve the mortars and gunnery. She could see him on his horse between rows of green fir trees, with binoculars slung on his chest. Or marching at the head of his company along the rocky mountain path, vanishing and reappearing again, as though he were riding the waves. Or by the roadside at night, talking in a husky voice to his comrades.

"Husky, you say? He wasn't coughing, was he?"

"Oh, we were all hoarse in the mountains. . . . That's nothing. . . . And he didn't cough, no. Breathed nice and even in his sleep. Only he'd toss sometimes and shout: 'Fire! . . . Fire! . . .'"

Shura made no secret of the keen envy she felt for this soldier, who had listened so recently to the breathing of the man she loved, had looked into his blue eyes, covered his feet surreptitiously with his own coat, so that they "shouldn't get chilly" in their canvas boots while he slept.

"Thank you! . . . Thank you, Shovkun!"

And with eyes full of tears, Shura gave his rough hand a hard squeeze.

The next day she asked for a job with Bryansky's unit. . . .

The little Transylvanian mountain town where her hospital was stationed had already disappeared from view beyond the passes. The motor column sped downhill, and

the red-and-gold mountains made way for it as if they were alive. Surely, after another mile or so, the road would come to an end, the rushing lorries would run one after another into that cliff and smash to smithereens. But here they'd covered that mile too, and the road didn't end; that was only a switchback turn—look out!—and skirting the cliff, the ribbon of the highway, carved in the mountainside by unknown masons, ran on and on and on.

Marching companies tramped and tramped. But these didn't look like the seasoned soldiers that came back from the hospitals with scars all over them. These had brand-new outfits, every one of them, and the billycans on their backs showed no trace of soot.

"Why are they so gloomy?" Shura asked the artillery officer who sat next to the cab, with a yellow look about the gills, as if he had a hangover.

"Yesterday's prisoners," he explained. "Just freed from Rumanian prisons and camps. Good replacements, these; their fighting blood is up."

"And where are their arms?"

"Oh, they'll get them when the time comes. Maybe you're standing on them right this minute."

Only now did Shura notice that she was standing on some long boxes that were nailed up fast. At the back of the lorry, carefully stacked dark-green tubes peeped out from under tarpaulin covers.

"Are those arms too?" she asked.

"I should hope to tell you they are. . . . Mortars. 82's. Shura recalled that these were the mortars Yuras had.

"Are they very deadly?"

"Grind the Fritzes to mincemeat. We call 'em samovars."

"Samovars?" She lifted surprised eyebrows. "You say they're deadly, and here they have such a sweet name!"

"And what about our beauties, the *Katyushas*? . . ."

Maybe they've got such a sweet name just because they're deadly."

With a smile, Shura thought: "What a dialectician."

The woods glowed in the sun with a soft, rich glow. Flocks of goats and sheep were scattered over the hill-sides. Far above the road, a little girl in a bright skirt stood, like a maiden in a song, and waved a white kerchief in greeting. Shura pulled off her khaki beret and waved back.

"How friendly the people are around here!" Her eyes shone. "My Hungarian landlady actually cried when I left...."

"Oh yes, ever so friendly," the officer said. "One night an armoured of ours lost his way up in the mountains. Found him next day, lying strangled in a vineyard."

"You don't say?" Shura exclaimed in horror.

"Well, what did you think? The fascists are creeping into their holes. These aren't the roughnecks of 1941, with their sleeves rolled up. These are wiler. Fighting them is harder than the open kind. And we often forget that.... Sure, they brought out drinks for that armoured, plenty of them, and sat a pretty girl next to him. That's the way it is...."

"Yes, you're right," Shura said thoughtfully, "we're too easy-going sometimes. We think everybody's like ourselves. Tell me... that time with the armoured—did they find the killers?"

"Some of them. Not all."

The lorries had climbed to the mouth of a high pass. Vivid autumn-garbed hills stretched to the very horizon, with its pure distant blue.

"Look, look!" Shura cried, pointing to a peaked hill that reared its bare stony summit above the others, while further down it was girdled with warm yellow woods. "Look how pretty it is! All golden!"

"Hill 805," the officer grunted; "our division took it."

If the officer had been more talkative, he might have told her the price the division had paid for that golden hill in the distance. Might have told her, among other things, that it had left as an eternal outpost there a Byelorussian student, a fine mortar officer, whom the artilleryman had known well ever since the Ternovaya fighting at Stalingrad. Maybe he wasn't feeling too good, or maybe he was sleepy; but anyway he didn't say anything more. And Shura didn't ask, because finer views were opening before her all the time.

The motor column was descending into the Hungarian plain. Faded steppes rolled to meet it, shrouded in a hazy dusk.

It wasn't long, evidently, since the front had passed over this country. Stacked by the roadside were green and yellow boxes of high explosive, and piles of defanged mines. Our sappers had dug them up by the thousand from the wrecked roads and bridges and from the area around. The fields had already been demined for a hundred metres on either side of the highway. The roadside ditches were littered with German motor vehicles and armoured cars, their noses buried in the ground and their charred black rears in the air.

The plain was like a sea, an infinite uniform expanse, with the shores lost in the evening haze.... All the way to the horizon, it was dotted with Hungarian farmsteads, like ships of old riding at anchor. The lorries rushed into this grizzly sea, the swaying farmsteads sailed away into the mists, with gardens for sails and tall poplars for masts....

The lorry jolted at a sharp turn, the officer knocked his head against the cab and came out of his doze.

"Well, we're over the mountains at last," he said lazily, jerking his chin at the mountains with an air of being heartily sick of them. "They were a horror, with those eternal jams!"

Shura looked round. The sun was sinking, tinging the mountainsides with a last gossamer touch of gold. It was a picture of gorgeous magnificence—the gleam of the bare rocks, the vari-coloured tiers of woodland, the Transylvanian mountain villages with their tall, narrow wooden houses. The clear sky did not press down on the mountain tops: tall and light, it gave the impression of floating over them. Surely there must be great white pillars somewhere beyond the horizon, supporting that tall, airy dome of blue.

Strung out for a whole kilometre along the road was a line of clanking tanks. The machines were new, they must have been sent up just recently, but the men sitting by their open hatches wore decorations that they'd had quite a time, to judge by the look of the ribbons.

"A tough bunch," the officer said. He began to worry that the tanks might dent one of his vehicles. "Got to look out when you're around those. They're none too careful."

"Where are they headed for?"

"Where they're headed for? Why, the Danube!"

"The Blue Danube!"

All the tanks had signs painted on them. "For home and country!... For Stalin!... For home and country!... For Stalin!"—Shura read, as their Studebaker overtook the roaring, petrol-reeking column.

Lashed onto each tank were extra barrels of petrol.

The front rumbled dully far ahead. The tankmen looked forward, pushing back their black helmets.

"For home and country!... For Stalin!..." Shura repeated like a vow, though the tanks bearing these legends were already behind her. She did not know she was repeating the last words of Yuri Bryansky, the words with which he had fallen forward on the hot stones.

Bursting with happiness, Shura tried to imagine her first meeting with Yuri. She wouldn't warn him that she was coming. Let it be a secret for a while, she wanted to take him by surprise, to see him as he was. If he had a beard—no matter: she'd never seen him with a beard. Yuras with a beard! "Girls, do you hear?" Her college friends seemed to be sitting next to her.

And how would he look when he first saw his Shura in a khaki overcoat with sleeves that were too long, and with army shoulder-straps on her shoulders? Maybe he wouldn't like it? Maybe he still pictured her in a little white frock and sandals—the sandals he had always made fun of! "You look like Pallas Athene in them," he had laughed. Or perhaps he remembered her as she was in the photo he liked best—standing by a canoe on the seashore, with a paddle in her hand. . . . The sun had quite blinded her that time. Yes! She had been light as a roe in those days, Yuras could never catch up with her fleet feet. She probably wouldn't be able to race him now, in her clumping soldier's boots. But one thing about her looks was still the same—her braids. A tight plaited rope, they were folded over her smoothly-parted hair, circling her head like a crown. Yuras had loved these "dear brown braids" and she hadn't cut them to please him.

"Where have you been then, my fleet footed Pallas Athene," he would ask, "how have you lived, what have you been doing all this time?"

And she would tell him everything, everything without reserve! Tell it with her brown eyes looking straight into his. She wouldn't need to hold anything back—her eyes wouldn't have that shifty, guilty look that women's eyes sometimes did have. She'd tell him proudly how in the bitter years of storm and stress, thrown hither and

thither, she had saved in her heart all that they called "Ours." Ours! They used to write it with a capital O in their letters. It was their secret treasure, so rich, a whole world in itself, pure and precious; well worth carrying through her whole life, like the best-loved of songs. In the darkest years of military reverses, it had been worth it to hope, though no letters came, that Yuri was alive somewhere, on the Western Front or the Northern, in the Caucasus or at Stalingrad. She would gladly have endured twice and three times as much misery to arrive at this moment of their meeting, arrive at it without ever having tripped, knowing that she had resisted all temptation—to come to him true and unsullied. She wouldn't have cared if her braids had turned white, as long as her eyes stayed clear and truthful. . . .

No, Yuras had nothing to reproach her with. He knew that she could only act as he had acted.

And he, in the very first days of the war, had tied up his mathematical notebooks, put them away until better times, and gone off to the front with a battalion of student volunteers.

Shura had gone to work in one of the Minsk hospitals. For a time they had corresponded, then one of her letters came back: "Transferred. Address unknown." They'd made out beforehand that if anything like that happened, they would try to find each other through their people. Shura's parents and Bryansky's mother had evacuated to the East. Shura's elder brother, a prominent Byelorussian Party functionary, was staying on in Minsk for underground work, but she only found that out much later. He came to the hospital one day and broke the news that their parents had been killed in a bombing on the way. The same day, she got a second letter returned with "Transferred. Address unknown." And her hopes of locating Yuri's mother didn't work out either,

because a few days later she herself was wounded in a Luftwaffe raid on the hospital.

She was sent east in a hospital train. It was a long trip—ten days—and before it was over, everybody in the carriage was well acquainted. There were airmen in it, and tankmen, and gunners, but the greatest number were, of course, infantrymen. She remembered one of the airmen telling that he had gone on a mission to Ploesci. The others had listened, as if spellbound. Ploesci! It had been so far away! Shura couldn't know then that three years would pass and Ploesci would be way back in the rear, even for her at her base hospital.

In the same compartment with her was a middle-aged political instructor from the infantry, with the hair receding from his bulging forehead and his shattered legs in a plaster-cast. Whole days went by without his saying anything. His broad stern face was immobile, as though it too were covered with grey plaster. Only when someone stood in front of the window, he would draw his reddish-brown eyebrows together and ask quietly, but firmly, that they should get away from it. All day long he kept his eyes fixed on the window, where his country flew past, like a regiment roused at the alarm.

Shura remembered the train pulling in at the first town that didn't have a blackout. Grabbing her crutches, she had hobbled out onto the platform. The lit-up station, the bright lights of the trams in the yellow drizzly fog.... Loudspeakers out in the square, music playing.... Perhaps that was when she felt to the full all the beauty of those pre-war yesterdays. The sight of that town brought up all the joys that had been cut short, all the wounds that had not healed. Her feelings were confused. She was inexpressibly happy that there were—there still were!—towns in her country which the fascist bombers were powerless to reach—towns free of the black night that the invaders brought. There were

fearless lights burning here—lights! lights! lights!—and the voice of Moscow came through the loudspeakers. And at the same time it hurt unbearably that somewhere in her country soldiers had to smoke secretly into their sleeves, that over their heads the black skies droned, and the air was rent by screaming sirens and shrieking bombs.

Within some two or three months she had lost her parents, lost touch with Yuri, and here she was standing alone on crutches on the lighted platform. Back in the carriage, she buried her face in her pillow and let the tears flow. The train moved on, the wheels rumbled monotonously, they switched off the light in the carriage—everybody was asleep. No one would see her; she could pour out in tears all that wrung her heart. But she had been wrong in thinking that everyone slept. The political instructor was awake. Apparently he felt worse at night, for she heard him grinding his teeth.

“Why are you crying?” he asked.

She could feel him looking at her in the darkness.

“I’m not crying,” she said. “I’m just . . . remembering things.”

“What things?”

“Oh, the way we used to live . . . a long time ago . . . before all this.”

For a while the political instructor didn’t answer. The peaceful lights of that town he had just seen out of the window had brought thousands of thoughts crowding to his mind too.

“We remember many things,” he said finally. “That’s good. But it isn’t enough, you know. In fact, it’s only liable nowadays to make one cry. We ought to reminisce less and think more about what to do. About what’s ahead of us. . . .”

“What’s ahead of us? Why, a hospital somewhere in Chita or Irkutsk.”

"And then?"

Shura wept silently. At the other end of the carriage, a burnt tankman was groaning louder and louder. He begged to be given morphine, alternating between threats and pitiful moans. He had been groaning for days now.

"It's worse for him than for me," Shura thought suddenly. "And what about this political instructor, who grinds his teeth every night as if he were gnawing at glass?... I was out on the platform at least, and he—"

The political instructor lit a cigarette.

"Don't you ever feel you want ... well, to have a good cry like that?" Shura asked, almost angrily.

"I want to ... walk," he replied. "Walk, walk ... run ... fly!"

He gave a deep sigh.

"And then ... what would you do?..."

"Go back to the infantry. Only the infantry."

The political instructor's name was Vorontsov.

They entered the Urals, studded with lights as with so many stars. Day and night, factory chimneys were smoking, trains rumbling, evacuated machinery from the Ukraine was being unloaded. And the ceaseless din of this industrial region was sweeter by far to Shura now than the blue southern sea by which she had spent one summer. She listened to this formidable music of inspired labour and thought she could never have enough of it. For that was not simply music, it was her own strength, her salvation, her future. Vorontsov changed too, his face was losing that plaster-cast look, it was brightening, coming to life.

"Such strength!" he said to her several times.

Then the roaring Urals tunnels were behind them, the train slid into Siberia. It raced ahead, hardly stopping at the stations, cutting into the white forests of silver birch. They rode a day, and it was all forest outside, all white, white, white. ... They rode for another,

and still it was all white, white, white. . . . Under the blue sky, the forests stood clear and transparent. That was the way Shura always thought of Siberia after—a clean, white land. She found it hard to believe that, under the tsars, Siberia had been a punishment.

“My Siberia!” Vorontsov said proudly. He came from somewhere near Achinsk.

One evening an interesting discussion developed in their compartment. A lively sergeant with a saucy lock of hair was telling about his amorous adventures, about the clever way he always managed them and kept his wife in the dark. He came from some sheep-breeding state farm in the Salsk Steppes.

The political instructor listened long and patiently, but then it was too much.

“What are you bragging about?” he asked, as if the sergeant had done him a personal injury. “Your treachery to your wife?”

“Treachery?” The sergeant winced at the harsh word. “But that isn’t treachery . . . Comrade Political Instructor. It’s just . . . well, family affairs.”

“And what do you think the family is, a footrag?” Vorontsov demanded roughly. “If I like, I’ll wear it, and if I don’t, I’ll throw it out and take another? . . . Isn’t the family the initial unit that goes to make up our society, our state, our strength?”

“It’s the atom!” said an aircraft gunner, letting down his legs from the upper berth.

“The atom. . . . And isn’t that atom our first school of will power, of discipline, of loyalty? Isn’t that where our children start their civic training? They look at you, it’s from their parents that they learn civic loyalty too. And you . . . look what you brag of!”

Shura sided warmly with Vorontsov. She too felt that family and civic life and loyalty were parts of the same whole.

Roused by this talk, the political instructor told them one of his Siberian forest tales. It was a parable about swans and their great law: they mate for the whole of their lives, and when one dies, the other dies too.

"... And if one mate is left alone," Vorontsov said, his eyes closed, "it hurtles out of the water and soars, singing, up into the sky, till it's just a pinpoint of white.... And from a great height, with wings folded, it drops like a stone to the ground...."

Jolting now in the lorry over the dark alien steppe, Shura thought of this legend of the swan's constancy, heard all the way back in 1941. When she saw Yuri, she would tell him about that too. And she'd tell him how she had sought him in Siberian hospitals, how she'd gone running down every time a fresh batch of wounded arrived....

To the hospital where she was lying, on the very bank of the Yenisei, volunteer helpers came often from the town.

On the river, winds from the Arctic whistled and white blizzards swirled; but in the hospital it was warm and there were green Ukrainian aloe-plants that the volunteers had brought. Songs in many different languages would sound in the corridors of an evening.

After her operation, Shura was in a pretty bad state. They had had to cut her up quite a bit before they could extract all the splinters. For several days she exhaled the anaesthetic, and her pillow seemed saturated with the stuff; she would push it away and lay her head on the bare mattress. She raved about Minsk and called for Yuri. She could eat nothing; and as though guessing her wish, one of the women-volunteers brought her some wild berries. They were so sour, so good.

"Where are you from?" Shura asked.

"Poltava locomotive repair works."

"You're from Poltava! From home!" Of course, Poltava was in the Ukraine; but out here, Byelorussians and Ukrainians felt that they were next-door neighbours. "What are you doing out in the taiga?"

"Everything we have to. In fact, I'd say we make some better things than we did back home."

Afterwards, when she was convalescing, Shura saw these "better things." Outside the town, which rang and crackled with the clear frost, planes darted about in the blue sky. There were models that no one had seen yet at the front. They were being tested, tested, tested from morning till night.

From the goods yard, long trains pulled out daily, westward bound. One day Shura got her first sight of the famous *Katyushas*. Dozens of flatcars were loaded with them. Covered with tarpaulin, their barrels thrust upwards, they sped and sped to the West. On these sunny days with the thermometer fifty below, thinking about the workers from Poltava, about new fighter models that were being tested five thousand kilometres from the front, about the trainloads of *Katyushas* rushing through the taiga—thinking about it all, Shura felt with a new poignancy that no enemy could ever, ever vanquish her country. And perhaps it was this implicit faith in her people that made her so certain of her own happiness too.

She had no news of Yuri, and yet she was positive he did exist somewhere.

III

They reached the division at night—or rather, not the division, but the little town with dark Gothic spires where it had been quartered the day before. It wasn't there any more. Even the supply bases had packed up

and moved on. The artillery officer ran cursing about the abandoned halting-place. He was active and bustling all of a sudden as Shura had never thought to see him.

"Where am I to look for 'em?" he shouted even at her, as if she could be expected to know. "Gone on ahead—where is ahead? And it's pitch-black, too!"

He turned his flashlight on all the walls, looking for markers.

Shura felt chilly. With the night, a northern wind had suddenly come up, the sky had clouded over quickly, it had begun to rain.

"I'll just climb into a bunker and sleep till the morning!" the artilleryman threatened. "Let them know how to leave no guides!"

"Sure, you can't move on in this darkness!" some new driver agreed. "Break your neck in a ditch or go up on a mine. Better wait till morning. . . ."

"Morning, morning," his chief shouted louder than ever, annoyed that the fellow had cottoned to the idea. "I'll show you the morning!"

And off he rushed again with his flashlight to examine the walls and telegraph poles.

"Got yours, eh?" the drivers laughed at the novice who had agreed so naively to wait till morning. "You don't know him, brother! He'd let you sleep, not half—just you listen to him! . . . Always yells one thing and does the opposite. He'll run around all night with his tongue hanging out until he finds our 'L.'"

A few minutes later the officer dived out of a little dark alleyway.

"Get in, everybody," he ordered, climbing into the forward Studebaker. "I've found that 'L.'"

The column moved off. They drove with the headlights on. In the cone of light, the rain made a close-meshed, slanting web. Shura got in under the big stiff

tarpaulin that covered the boxes. It had been gashed all over by splinters, and the wind blew in as through a torn sail.

The lorries kept stopping, and the officer darted out to flash his light on the telegraph poles and bellow.

"What's he cursing for?" Shura wondered, dozing comfortably. "Everything's so good, and here he curses...."

The stiff sail rattled over her head. A caulked ship's-bottom hummed. A wide blue sea stretched on every side. Birds soared in the sky, clustered round the masts, perched on the seamen's salt-caked shoulders. Bronzed sailors were singing on deck about unexplored regions and green tropic lands. The sea flashed and sparkled, ploughed up by the stern.

When Shura woke and flung off the tarpaulin, dawn was already breaking. The lashing rain stung her face. Somewhere ahead, only just audible, machine guns were chattering. Off the road, the same farms as yesterday showed dimly through the grey drizzle, with the well-beams sticking up like semaphores. Had they covered so little ground during the night?

She jumped down and went forward to the head of the column. The way was blocked by a little GAZ van, lying on its side in the middle of the road. Several drivers were fussing around it. Crawling about on their knees, two lieutenants with their sleeves rolled up were picking something out of the mud.

"What are you looking?" one of them asked Shura. "Don't recognize it, eh? The outfit of Ivan Fyodorov, the first Russian printer!"

This was the divisional newspaper office. It had blown up providentially on a mine. Providentially, because the journalists, though stunned, were still alive and were now diligently collecting the types scattered in the dirt.

Shura decided not to wait until the road was cleared: she would push on on foot. On hearing that she was bound for Samiyev's regiment, the lieutenants told her the shortest way to reach it. A newspaperman never ceases to be a newspaperman: picking type out of the mud in the roadway, stunned like fish by the explosion, these two had contrived all the same to discover where the different outfits were located.

Shura thanked the artilleryman for the lift, threw her groundsheet over her shoulders and set off.

The rain poured and poured. The ditches filled with turbid water. Now the ways parted—the divisional marker pointed left with the road, the regimental one, across the rutted meadows. Wherever she looked, the grass gleamed with little lakes of rainwater; here and there, signposts stuck up out of them. The less watery spots showed the prints of hundreds of feet. Shura tried to guess which were Yuri's. She laughed herself at her fancy, but went on looking all the same.... These here, small and distinct, might be his ... pressed in confidently from heel to toe. Here they crossed the ditch, now they disappeared under water. Don't wash away his footprints, slanting Hungarian rains! Let them dry in the wind and sun till they're hard as stone!

A line of covered carts appeared out of the grey drizzle.

"Going from the regiment to the divisional dumps," Shura thought. "I'll ask them. They ought to know."

In the last cart somebody was singing. The song, slow and murmuring, carried far over the dark meadows....

Dark is the night, my beloved, that keeps us apart....

The voice was deep, rich, resonant. Shura pictured its owner as young and good-looking. And that song,

she felt, might have been born here, in these dark Hungarian nights on the plain, in fox holes by a strange road.

*Dark is the night, just the whistling of bullets around,
Just the sighing of wind in the wires
And the stars faint above us. . . .*

When the singer was passing Shura, she called to him. A kindly middle-aged face with wet grey whiskers peered out from under the tilt.

"Was that him singing?" Shura thought incredulously, and asked:

"Are you from Samiyev's outfit?"

"Yes." The man stopped his horses.

"Do you know Senior Lieutenant Bryansky?"

"Bryansky?" His look was even more kindly than before. "Sure, I know him well. One of our Stalingraders. . . ." He was silent for a moment. "A good officer. Had a head on him."

"Had?" Shura felt herself going cold. "Why *had*?"

"Eh, dearie, and can't you guess?" The man sighed. "Up in the Alps . . . at Hill 805 . . . the death of the brave."

Shura covered her face with her hands.

"Hey, Ulyanich!" they called from up in front. "What are you stopping for? Get moving!"

She did not hear the cart move off. She was still standing there with her hands over her face. The web of rain wove on and on, out of thousands and thousands of strands. The soldier, on his way to catch up with the others, looked back several times over his shoulder. A grey mist enveloped the whole plain. And the girl stood without moving, like a poplar bent by the wind.

"The death of the brave. . . ."

That was what he had said: the death of the brave. Shura did not cry. She didn't feel any pain yet, as a

wounded man does not feel it in the heat of the moment. Her whole body was numb.

*... And the cold bitter night and the steppe
Lie relentless between us. . . .*

Was somebody really singing a long way off, or was she imagining it? She thought she could turn to stone as she stood there, turn to stone this very minute and go on standing there in that empty plain like a stone woman of the Scythians.

"Why has he stopped singing?" She seemed to come out of her trance, and listened. As often happens at moments of acute misery, her mind clutched at trivialities to escape from the one thing that mattered. "Why isn't he singing?"

By now the carts were barely visible in the rain.

All of a sudden she felt utterly exhausted. She wanted to sit down, to stretch out on the ground. To make sure she didn't, she stumbled forward.

At Hill 805 . . . 805. . . . Why, that was that hill she had seen! That golden hill! Shura cried out and flung up her hands. The heavy clouds raced swiftly above her, they seemed just over her head. Now she felt she would sob, toss, scream, because she was alone, all alone in the wide world. Didn't this wet waste stretch callously to the very horizon? Machine guns were rattling somewhere. Where were they? Nobody to be seen anywhere.

A farmhouse loomed ahead.

Shura walked, trying automatically to step in the footprints that were already there.

The first thing she noticed on nearing the farm was an "L" scratched deep in the wall—with a bayonet, most likely. She stood for a long time reading this one letter, the sole reminder of home on that alien wall.

In the farmyard and orchard were carts loaded with

ammunition. Near them, for want of stabling, stood unharnessed horses, wet and shivering in the cold.

Shura dragged herself into the orchard, got as far as the first tree, flung her arms round the wet trunk, and stayed that way. Was it really all over? Before the war, she and Yuri had waited so patiently for the time when they would be through with college, would get married, would be working together. There had been so much happiness ahead, they couldn't even imagine it not coming true. They were going to join hands like children, enter the fresh glow of a spring morning and go on and on and on in it. . . .

"Yuri!" she whispered, pressing her hot forehead against the wet bark, hardly knowing where she was. "Yuras!"

Her shoulders quivered. Why, if she had known, she would have jumped down yesterday, would have gone flying to that golden hill!

Steps sounded behind her. She turned round resentfully. A thickset soldier stood before her, planted firmly on his feet; his legs curved like a cavalryman's. He was shorter than Shura, but broad in the shoulder and solidly made. Sharp eyes with a Mongoloid slant looked at her, eager to help.

He saluted abruptly.

"You are looking for someone?" he asked with concern, speaking with a noticeable accent. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for Bryansky. . . ."

"Bryansky? I know Bryansky."

Shura started: he spoke of Yuri as of a living man! Something indefinable, that applies only to the living, not to the dead, sounded in the inflections of his voice. And Shura, with all her perceptions heightened, caught it directly. At once she was seized with the idea that what she had heard in the meadow was not true.

"You . . . you know him?"

She leant forward impulsively and stood motionless, expectant. Thousands of hopes fluttered down on her and settled like pigeons on her shoulders, her hands. Her delicate white skin glowed. She had never been so radiantly beautiful.

"You know him?"

"I'm supply sergeant in his company."

"Then he's alive?"

"He . . . I'm sorry. . . ."

"He— isn't?"

"But his company is."

IV

Vasya Bagirov, the mortar company's supply sergeant, was one of those for whom the war had long become their daily life. A Bashkir by nationality, and by nature active, impetuous, determined to have his way, he had led a bustling life before the war. Once out of secondary school, he had plunged with headlong impatience into the world, and by the time he was twenty-five, he had been a carpenter beyond the Arctic Circle, had tramped with herds all the way to the Mongolian People's Republic, had scoured the Urals for precious stones. With the impetuosity of youth, he had flung himself upon life, which opened all its wealth of opportunity before him and his people, for centuries ignorant and oppressed. As though intoxicated by these boundless new prospects, he was eager to see everything, learn about everything, come into contact with everything that there was in this fascinating ocean—for that was the way he pictured his great country.

Far from impairing his iron constitution, all this roaming had hardened it marvellously. Ailments were powerless to touch him, frosts did not trouble him in the

least; whenever mittens were issued, he would lose them the next day, and yet he never complained of cold fingers.

Vasya had been with the mortar outfit ever since Stalingrad, and had tasted to the full of the fighting man's hard lot. It was only at the Dnieper bridgehead, with the company so far shrunk that Vasya could consider himself a platoon, that Bryansky had made him supply sergeant. And in this capacity his talents had unfolded to the full.

The company's interests, the company's honour became, as it were, the object of his whole existence. Shrewd and dogged, he would do anything under the sun for his company's sake. He struck up acquaintanceships, he schemed, he manoeuvred to get for his men the best of food and drink, model equipment, plenty of ammunition. For example, he was determined to have the mortarmen ride only the best horses, provoking the envy of the whole regiment. It would happen that Vasya disappeared for a whole night and came back in the morning covered with bruises and riding not his own mount, but some miserable hack.

"Been calling on the Cossacks, he has," the drivers would remark sympathetically, but taking good care that Vasya shouldn't hear. The mere mention of Cossacks sent him raving on these occasions.

The Don Cossacks from the adjacent cavalry corps had given the mortar company's supply sergeant many a wallop for his practice of raiding them for horses. It has to be said in fairness, however, that Vasya never stooped to shameful flight, but fought, even if the odds were ten to one, until he was dragged from his horse and turned loose on his two pins. By mistake one night, he actually untied his own regimental commander's mount. Making his explanations to Samiyev afterwards, he said that "it was very dark and, besides, he was in a hurry."

Bagirov was forgiven for a lot, for everybody knew he was utterly disinterested: for himself he would not have taken a stitch. When some man's boots went to pieces on the march, Vasya pulled off his own and gave them to him without thinking twice about it.

But most of all did Vasya atone for his sins in combat. Out of combat he came pardoned for everything. For how could you punish a man whose daring was proverbial throughout the regiment? Who of the regiment's old-timers could forget how, in the Dniester fighting that spring, Bagirov had dashed on horseback after a German panzer and set it alight with a fire-bottle? In Transylvania, wasn't it Bagirov that had pinched a German kitchen, complete with eats, and rattled on it in the night right across No Man's Land? He hadn't even been wounded that time. It seems the fates themselves have a soft spot for the bold.

Combat was for Vasya a sacrament in the name of which he did not spare either himself or his subordinates. As long as things were quiet, Vasya was quiet too. He didn't quarrel with anybody and went about his business in a sleepy sort of way, you would think that if you stroked him, he would purr like a tame tiger-cub. His shiny brown face was good-natured, and his slanting slits of eyes looked out lazily.

But once the fighting started—just look out! Then he was on horseback twenty-four hours a day, galloping now to the forward positions, now to the ammunition depot, now the devil knew where, and everything he put his hand to got done like greased lightning. Woe to the fumbler who came under Bagirov's eye at such a moment!

Bryansky valued Vasya and was proud of him. When other company commanders boasted in front of him about the smart supply sergeants they had, he would say:

"I know those sergeants of yours! Now my sergeant's something like! If I got landed in hell itself, he'd round up and deliver the ammunition. Say what you will, he was in the thick of it with me at Stalingrad. And the Stalingrad school means something...."

And it was a fact that Bagirov would have followed Bryansky through thick and thin. It was before Bryansky that he had taken the oath. Bryansky had presented him with his new tommy gun. His country itself had named Bryansky his chief. And so he worried much more about Bryansky than he did about himself, and guarded his honour more jealously than his own, for that was the honour of the company. Caught in some dubious enterprise, he would do everything to take all the blame upon himself, not to let his company commander be dragged into it, not to discredit his chief in any way.

And it was only to Bryansky that Vasya confided his private affairs.

Vasya was married. The winter before, when they were stationed in a steppeland hamlet near Kirovograd, a jolly young lass with bright-coloured beads round her neck had fallen in love with him in good earnest. She had divined in him a dependable husband and head of the family, and, disregarding the neighbours' gossip, she had given her hand gladly to this tough soldier with the curved legs of a horseman born. "We'll have sons," she whispered, "such sweet dark little Chinees with slanting eyes." They'd had a quick soldier's wedding, with home-made beetroot vodka. Beardless Bryansky, out of respect for his seniority, had given the bride away. Very brief was the time that Bagirov had spent with his warbling young bride. But in distant parts he did not forget her. Puffing and blowing, he replied to her loving letters, putting in affectionate scraps of Ukrainian that had lodged in his

memory. He sent her all his pay, down to the last kopek, and was firmly determined to go back to her after the war. Bryansky supported him in this intention and helped him to shake off the mischief-making suspicions that some people tried to sow, just for the fun of the thing, in the quick-tempered sergeant's heart.

Vasya corresponded with many officers and men who were now in hospital. Even people who had been away for a very long time invariably fixed on Vasya when they decided to send word of themselves to the company and were trying to think whom to address it to. Did the boys imagine he was immortal?

It was Vasya, too, that wrote to the families of men who were killed. And if his departed comrade had no particular exploits to his credit, Vasya supplied them himself. How could he write impersonally about a fellow with whom he'd struggled through the Transylvanian forests—had forded the Mures, up to the neck in the icy water—had celebrated the November anniversary under some wet haystack on a Hungarian farm? No, about men like these Vasya could write only with deep emotion, in his letters they were all remarkable soldiers, who had battered down pillboxes, blown up tanks, faced death fearlessly. He remembered them all by name, told newcomers moving stories about them, and just let anybody try to speak of them without proper respect! These were the sacred traditions of his company—they were his honour, his glory—and he cherished them faithfully in his heart. For only in the work of his company did he see the purpose of his own being, only with his outfit did he feel himself a real man.

And when he learnt that standing before him was the sweetheart of his beloved commander, the best words of comfort he knew were that Bryansky's

company existed, that it lived on. Vasya felt there could be no higher consolation than this.

And that was the way Shura too understood him.

"When a person has nothing more left," she thought, "when he thinks he's utterly alone, like the last ear of corn in a reaped field, he is wrong: he still has the greatest and finest possession of all—his people. That in itself is worth living and fighting for."

The sergeant took Shura into the house, whispered something to the men, and their faces turned grave and solemn. They saluted her with marked respect. The room was warm, wood crackled in the stove, and all at once Shura realized that she was frozen to the marrow—her whole body shivered. They gave her tea, her tear-stained eyes were red and round like a pigeon's. Throwing off her wet, heavy coat, she huddled down in the corner of the couch and was asleep before she knew it.

The men walked on tiptoe, the cook stopped rattling his pans; and by a grapevine signal system, the news went flashing to the forward line that sleeping, dead tired, on a couch at the mortar company's supply base was a slim, pretty girl—Bryansky's sweetheart.

Shura slept uneasily, by fits and starts, having bad dreams when she was asleep and muttering incoherently when she wasn't. Even in her sleep she felt oppressed.

When she woke up, there was nobody in the room. A candle was burning on the table. The rain beat a tattoo on the black windows, as though swallows were pecking on the panes, looking for a place to warm up. Her coat had been dried and hung over a chair by the couch; on the floor stood her boots, shined to such brilliance that she hardly knew them.

She drew them on slowly and went into the kitchen, where the cook informed her that supper was ready. She thanked him and stepped out on the veranda.

The wind was rattling the iron roof. The trees moaned with a dreary autumn moan, everything was wrapped in a dense impenetrable darkness. The rain pouring down from the sky seemed black as pitch as well; the front was silent, or maybe she couldn't hear it because of the wind. Little by little her eyes got used to the darkness and distinguished the outlines of horses and carts. Water-filled wheel ruts gleamed dully.

A cool freshness blew from the steppe. Shura breathed it in and felt her head clearing gradually.

Adjoining the house were the outbuildings. As is common at Hungarian farmsteads, the house, the stables and the sheds were all under one roof.

Next to the veranda, by the wide-open doors of the stables, horses stood munching their feed. Up in the hayloft, men were talking.

"Yes, indeed, Roman," Shura heard a thoughtful voice say. "These are certainly rich parts.... Such land! You don't see them eating that Rumanian *mamaliga*, no, it's white wheaten bread, and their boots are the finest leather. The Germans didn't have time yet to pick them clean and dress 'em in those wooden clogs."

"Well, they can thank us for it, Khoma. Would they ever have got out of the Fritzes' clutches by themselves? Not on your life!"

"Yes, that's how they would have lived: in their own home, seemingly, but actually no better than hirelings. And there's nothing worse than being... homeless like that. Remember how Bryansky called out just before he was killed: 'For home and country!' Even his voice was different, somehow.... Just think what it means, Roman—your country! As long as you've got it, you're rich and you're strong and everybody has need of you. And if—God forbid—you

should lose it, why then you can count that you've got nothing any more. What would you be without it? It won't even bear thinking of. Why, they'd tear you to pieces with their dogs on this very farm. Wouldn't give you a drink of water.... 'A tramp,' they'd say, 'a bastard without kith or kin!'"

A cigarette-lighter flashed, and Shura saw whiskered, deeply tanned faces—they might have been cast of red copper. When they'd lit up, the men went on talking.

"Whereas this way, Roman, they hold you in honour and respect wherever you go. They take one look at your shoulder-straps, at the star on your cap, at your tommy gun—and off come their hats.... Because you're a big man for them, a fellow from District Headquarters ... no, from the centre itself...."

"Now I know, Khoma, why Bryansky used to get so angry when we put on those Transylvanian shepherd hats.... You don't look right in them at all. Remember how he used to make us shine up our Guards badges? That wasn't for nothing either. He wanted the boys to look dashing, to have everything spick-and-span. To have them bear themselves as befits representatives of a country like ours. Used to say: 'Let them like you, but let them stand in awe of you as well.... You say a word, and already they're nodding—*jo*, *jo*—yes, yes, that is. Even if they don't know what you're saying, it's *jo* all the same.... In advance, like.... And all the working folks are happy....'"

"I should say so! Think of all the camps we smashed open. Of all the people that would have rotted in them! When you've gone through a place, it's like after rain in springtime: the air so fresh, the ground green.... A historical mission, Bryansky used to say...."

Bryansky. ... Yuras.... Shura felt he was still alive

among these men, was still admonishing and encouraging them, permitting and forbidding things, entering actively into their inner life.

Wasn't that immortality?

A horseman rode unhurriedly into the yard; a sentry hailed him, invisible among the carts. The horseman replied moodily. By the voice, Shura recognized the sergeant.

"Didn't get off the track, did you, Comrade Sergeant?" somebody asked as Bagirov handed him the creaking saddle. "Such pitch darkness!"

"Not a light anywhere, just as if to spite you," the sergeant grumbled. "Those farmhouses all looking alike, and not a soul about. Only the wheel ruts to show the way."

"The wheel ruts?"

"Sure. . . . Our wheel ruts shine, you know."

And Shura, going back into the house across the veranda, thought to herself: "'Our wheel ruts shine!' What a wonderful thing to say. . . ."

V

The arrival of a dead officer's fiancée was quite an event in the regiment. Major Vorontsov got Shura appointed, as she wished, to head the medical detachment of the 3rd Battalion—the battalion with which Bryansky had fought and died.

Shura recognized Vorontsov at once. He had not changed much outwardly in these years. The same grey, searching eyes under shaggy brown eyebrows. The big, bulging head, only quite bald now. Calm, collected movements. After the way his legs had been smashed, Shura was surprised to see that he wasn't even limping.

The 3rd Battalion was entrenched for the present in acres of vineyard amidst steppeland hills and gullies, a few dozen kilometres northeast of Budapest. Autumn rains poured through a grey sieve for days on end; and when it wasn't raining, mists hung over the fields from daybreak to nightfall. The companies had dug into the slippery black ground, and every night they had to work like mad: water flooded the trenches. The infantry bailed it out with buckets, while the mortarmen had got hold somewhere of a small fire pump and pumped the water out, full of praise for the mechanical age.

The mortars stood in their pits under awnings, like modish misses under coy parasols; and their crews addressed them most ceremoniously:

"May I have the pleasure of inspecting your sights? . . ."

"Permit me to spruce you up with this here cleaning-rod. . . ."

In Shura's early days in the battalion, there was much to distress her. Admirers beset her on all sides. Some young officers who had joined the battalion since Bryansky's death, and who knew him only by hearsay, were not above parading as his friends when opportunity offered. They told Shura all kinds of fantastic stories about him. When that didn't help, some "took ill." The telephone would call Shura now to one company, now to another. She went to them all patiently without discovering any serious ailments. While she was about it, she undertook a general inspection, and made things hot for careless men in whose billycans she discovered bits of old food.

She would come back to Headquarters weary and spattered with dirt, for although there were duck-boards and doors laid in the trenches to walk on, the liquid mud splashed all the way up to her knees. After her

visits; the "sick" officers boasted artlessly over the phone that Shura had felt their pulse.

One day the battalion senior adjutant, Captain Speransky, "took ill" too. He huddled in his dugout all day: "his bones ached," he said, and he "had the shivers." In the evening, his orderly came to Shura: the captain was sick and would she come over.

So Shura, after running about the trenches all day, had to fling her coat over her shoulders and go. Nearing the adjutant's dugout, she made out the strumming of a guitar. But when she knocked on the door, the guitar fell silent and she heard what was almost a groan:

"O-o-oh...."

The dugout was clean and smelt of scent. An improvised oil-lamp was burning on the table. At the head of the captain's bunk stood a gleaming Hungarian sword with which he never parted. "Looks healthy as a pig," Shura thought, but, suppressing her irritation, she asked:

"What's wrong with you?"

"I don't rightly know, Shura, it's just that I feel ... sort of funny...."

"Running a fever?"

"Now you mention it, I think I am."

She got out the thermometer and made him take his temperature.

"It's normal," she said shortly.

"Now don't be cross with me, Shura." Speransky got up on his elbow. "You know what a dog's life it is here.... A miserable dog's life, squatting in these soggy vineyards! If we were advancing, now...."

"Is that what you sent your orderly for?"

"Well ... suppose I did...."

Shura was choking.

"Captain, you—you're a cad."

To keep from bursting into tears, she strode to the door, holding on to the front of her coat so it shouldn't slip off. Feet thumped on the roof. "Been listening at the chimney, damn them," Speransky swore to himself. "They'll noise it about now...."

Shura came into her damp dugout. On a canvas stretcher on the floor, one of the litter-bearers was asleep, his cap over his face. She got to her bunk, pulled off her boots and sat down with her feet under her. She was choking with mortification. Was it her fault that it was so miserable, squatting in these Hungarian vineyards? Had she come here to be somebody's plaything and pleasure? Head buried in her sharp knees, she cried bitterly.

The following day, Vorontsov paid a visit to the battalion. With Captain Chumachenko, the battalion commander, he looked in at Shura's dugout too.

"Not very warm in here," he said, sitting down on the bunk. "What do you say, Chumachenko?"

"No, not very."

"Wouldn't be a bad idea for you to change with her.... Doesn't appeal to you, eh?"

The captain reddened.

"Well then, so you won't have to change, tell them to put a stove in here.... A stove, see? We may have to be putting wounded here before we're through. And this child too is just perished with the cold."

Certainly Shura was very pale, with blue rings under her eyes as she stood there in her khaki uniform dress, with the Guards badge on her breast.

"You were quite different then," the major said slowly. "In the train, remember? Kept clattering all over the carriage with your crutches and blocking out the window. You're graver now, more serious...."

"I've learnt a thing or two since then," Shura said briefly.

"You couldn't very well help it.... The war's quite a university.... While in those days you used to cry at night, mostly, and think back and remember."

"I still think back to things...."

"What things?"

"Everything."

"Well, for instance?"

"Well, for instance your legend about the swans."

"Oh, that. I remember. But it's not a legend, you know.... No. It really is that way with them."

"Only one single time? For their whole lives? And then it's—head down?"

"Yes. But don't forget that swans are birds. Pure, lovely birds that all the poets have written about—but still they're only birds."

"And with human beings?"

"With human beings it can't end that way. Because, you see, our interests aren't limited to that. A swan!... A swan sees only his mate and his little lake. While man—oho! He sees vast horizons. Is there anybody on earth with wider wings than man? That's the way it is, my dear.... And how are you getting on here?"

"I'm getting on fine."

Chumachenko sighed uneasily.

"Even fine, eh?" Vorontsov repeated. "They don't bother you? Leave you in peace, do they?"

"Oh yes." Shura blushed like a ripening apple.

"Well, I've been hearing it—a little different." Vorontsov frowned and got up, his knee-joints creaking.

"You heard about it too, Chumachenko?"

"Yes, Comrade Major."

"Soon as this defence business sets in, they start running amuck!" Vorontsov swore.

"It's all because they haven't got enough to do."

A little later everyone at Headquarters saw the major go stooping into Captain Chumachenko's dugout,

where he turned everybody out and sent the orderly for Speransky. The adjutant ran past, his spurs ringing. The regiment's acknowledged lady-killer, he took very good care of his appearance.

Nobody knew what the gallant captain talked about with the major during their long tête-à-tête in the battalion commander's dugout. But when he bounced out, he was red as a lobster, and for no reason at all gave a nasty calling down to his orderly, who had the bad luck to run across his path.

The major told Chumachenko: all young officers whose "pulse wasn't normal" should be sent on outpost duty for a cure.

"Let 'em take mud baths!" he said drily, knowing that in the outpost trenches the mud came up to your waist. "That'll cure them in no time. Get rid of their heart trouble and all their other ailments."

After this affair, Shura was regularly referred to as Faithful. Faithful! More than anybody else, the mortar-men were pleased with this new name of hers. They were watching her all the time, with dozens of eyes and ears. And they would have taken it as a personal affront if Shura Yasnogorskaya, their splendid commander's girl, had given grounds to be called anything else.

Shura's relations with the mortarmen were of a special kind. By a tacit understanding, Shura considered that this was "her" company, and the mortarmen felt the same way about her. From force of habit, quite a few people still referred to it as Bryansky's company. There were many new soldiers in it by now, who hadn't been there in Bryansky's day, but they too, under the influence of the men he had trained, developed a feeling of deep respect for this dead commander, whom they knew like some figure in a familiar song.

Of Bryansky's contemporaries there still remained in the company Roman and Denis Blazhenko, the little

telephone-operator Makoveichik, Khoma Khayetsky, that Podolya wag, Sergeant Bagirov and a few others. Chernysh was writing from hospital, addressing his letters to the sergeant. He was getting better. Sagaida had been shell-shocked on the Tisza, and he too was having a spell in some front-line hospital.

Commanding the company now was Senior Lieutenant Karmazin, who had been sent up from the reserve. As a rule the battalion addressed Karmazin as "Ivan Antonich," in the civilian name-and-patronymic style, possibly out of respect for his schoolmastering past. Before the war, Karmazin had been headmaster of a secondary school somewhere around Chernigov. A dependable person of forty or thereabouts, he was much respected by subordinates and superiors alike, as a man who knew his job and who stuck to his principles. When any arguments developed among the officers, Ivan Antonich was usually chosen to arbitrate. They knew that he would never let his judgment be swayed by personal bias or favour.

Ivan Antonich was quite without jealousy of his predecessor. He did not take offence at all when his company was referred to as "Bryansky's."

"I try to judge people objectively, not subjectively," he would say deliberately, weighing each word, when the conversation touched on the subject. "Bryansky has a right to be remembered."

And the men who had fought under Bryansky honoured Ivan Antonich for this generous "objectivity."

Whenever Shura showed up at the mortar-post, everything was ready to receive her. The green "samovars" under their coquettish parasols seemed to be giving her a smile of welcome. Ivan Antonich would come lumbering out of his dugout, his groundsheet brushing the sides of the narrow entrance. And he'd look so solemn about it that Shura felt he might almost be

holding the traditional welcome-offering of bread and salt on an embroidered napkin.

The boys waited with a secret thrill for Shura to come into their catacombs and look at their billycans, which blazed on the shelves like the very sun—they had, of course, been shined up in expectation of her visit. Inspecting the mortar-men, Shura commended them each time for their cleanliness. She held them up as an example to other companies. How could she guess that those poor shirts were roasted mercilessly over the fire when she was due? When “a visitor” was discovered one day on some newcomer to the outfit, the whole company blushed. Such disgrace! Senior Sergeant Onishchenko, the company Party organizer, vowed on the spot that “it wouldn’t happen again.”

While Shura was with them, not one coarse word escaped anybody’s lips. Not only the soldiers’ talk, their very looks took on a new delicacy. What pleased Ivan Antonich most about it was that no one had told the boys to behave that way. The thing just happened, simply because this was their hero-officer’s girl, because she was Faithful, because by her fidelity and purity she too, they felt, maintained their company’s honour and rightful pride.

When she was in the battalion’s rear echelon, Shura never missed looking in on Vasya Bagirov and his lot. It drew her there, the way home draws one with its dear homelike smells. And though the soldiers, with a sense of inborn tact, never talked about Bryansky when she was around, she could tell by all kinds of little things that Yuri continued to live among them, to influence them.

The soldiers’ friendliness never lapsed into familiarity. Perhaps Shura’s officer’s insignia restrained them—or maybe they simply knew by instinct where the boundary lay.

The company tailor hesitated for a long time before he finally ventured to offer Shura his services:

"Wouldn't you like me to alter that coat of yours a little bit?..."

Shura looked down at her over-long sleeves with the turned-up cuffs, and barely managed to hold back tears of emotion. They thought about her, looked after her with such touching awkwardness!

In honour of Shura's visit, the mortarmen's cook, Grisha, would roast and bake all the delicacies he could think of. Serving Shura her dinner, he would pick out for her the chicken's gizzards, probably because they were his own favourite dish. And though the boys watched him narrowly, they never once saw him cast a questionable look at Shura's trim figure. Yet the whole company knew that the cook was an inveterate Don Juan. His potatoes were peeled regularly by painted jades that he contrived to get hold of even at the isolated steppeland farmsteads. The men wondered long and earnestly what it was about their cook, who was small and round-shouldered, that the foreign dames found so irresistible. Khoma Khayetsky figured out for some reason that it was Grisha's stoop.

Khayetsky himself was straight as a wand. Twisting his whiskers into a tight little spiral, he would launch into conversation with Shura about the Hungarian Admiral Horthy. It very much interested and even worried Khoma how a country that didn't have a single sea could be ruled by an admiral.

"Why, there could be no end of a mess," he would say in his characteristic singsong. "He may be all right for the sea, but on land you've got to know how to hold a pair of reins. . . . Take me, now. . . ."

Shura could not help smiling at his disquisitions.

Sending the companies to the bathhouse, she would catch herself making little differences between them.

When the mortarmen came for their bath, she couldn't keep from picking out the best, whitest underclothes for them. And she would run in more often than usual to ask if they had enough hot water and soap. The boys, red from head to heel, would turn to the wall and chorus:

"Yes, yes, we've got plenty!"

Shura scolded herself for not being impartial. But how could she be quite impartial when Vasya Bagirov, fitting out a cart specially to take her back to Headquarters, flung the groundsheet over her shoulders like a real knight of old! And he kept telling the driver to be careful, not to lose his way in the fog, not to land her with the Fritzes. The man was quite offended:

"Why Comrade Sergeant! It's not as if you've only known me since yesterday!"

When Shura was leaving, Bagirov called her aside and said with an air of dark mystery, his black slanting eyes flashing:

"If anybody bothers you. . . . Or says anything he shouldn't. . . . You tell us. You just tell us. And we'll decorate his mug for him good and proper. . . . Regular Guards style!"

VI

Khoma Khayetsky had changed at the front right before everybody's eyes.

This was no longer the roguish, slightly scatter-brained peasant who used to dig his nails into the ground when the Messers came over and implore some unknown force "not to let it get him." In spite of all the hardships and trials that fell to the front-line soldier's lot, Khoma actually managed to put on weight, and his cheeks filled out. When he came over to the firing positions with a cartload of ammunition, he would start wres-

tling with Makoveichik, kicking out behind him like a horse. His wariness and timidity had given place gradually to a lofty, not to say cocky assurance. He wore a German knife-bayonet in his belt day and night, bragging that some day he'd settle some Fritz's hash with that knife.

"Oh, you Fritz!" he would declaim, shaking his fist in the enemy's direction. "Didn't I tell you in 'forty-one that you might get half round the world by your crooked ways, but you'd never get back home again? And you won't get back, you mark my word!"

At Khoma's side hung an empty holster, ready to receive the pistol that it was his dream to capture.

Before, Khoma had always done his best to keep out of harm's way when drivers from different units got to sparring, as they sometimes did, on the road or at some crowded crossing in the dark. But Bagirov gave him such a dressing down for it that it was a long time before Khoma was himself again.

"What do you mean by hanging back, Khayetsky?" the sergeant shouted. "Why were you hiding under that cart of yours when the transport fellows were pitching into Ostrovsky?"

It was a rule with Bagirov that if one of his boys got landed in a fight, everybody else had to back him up.

"I'm left-handed," Khoma pleaded. "And besides, one of my wheels was coming off."

"Your wheel! It was your pants that were coming off, not your wheel. You'll take three extra turns of duty for not helping your fellow out."

"Yes, Comrade Sergeant." Khoma swallowed the bitter pill. "Only when am I to take them? I'm on sentry-go every night as it is. After the war maybe?"

"None of your wisecracking, Khayetsky! Three pails of potatoes! D'you hear that, Grisha?"

"Yes, Comrade Sergeant!" the cook responded. He was delighted to make Khoma work. Khayetsky's ready tongue was forever poking fun at Grisha's love affairs.

"Comrade Sergeant," Khoma begged. "Have a heart!"

"Oh, all right," Bagirov said. "I'll see how you behave in future...."

After that, Khoma didn't dive under his cart any more. In time his Gypsy whiskers and loud, sonorous voice came to dominate all the crossings. He would be the first to clatter onto the boards, his heavy tasselled whip held menacingly above his head.

It was Ivan Antonich's reforms that had put Khayetsky in the supply column. To have the company a closer team and keep what he called a separate "driver caste" from growing up, Ivan Antonich had introduced a periodic rotation. After a spell with the horses, the drivers were sent up to man the mortars, and others, who had been with the mortars, took their place. Ivan Antonich was proud of his reform, because this way none of his men "forgot how to shoot." Now Khoma was serving his spell in the rear echelon.

To be sure, transport duty with the mortar companies could be called the rear only by courtesy. Whenever possible, this "rear echelon" was stationed next to the mortars. On the march, they usually moved together. Only if action stations were right next to the infantry line and there was no cover for the vehicles, these would stop in some community a mile or two further back. Here enemy machine guns did not reach them, but artillery and mortar fire came down on them as much as on anybody else. Besides, when an action was in progress, the ammunition vehicles had to be travelling back and forth all the time, getting through in broad daylight in full view of the enemy. The mortars couldn't wait. That was the reason, incidentally, why the casualties in the transport column were always heavier than

among the men who did the actual firing. And yet Khoma liked being with the supply sergeant's outfit. Like the sergeant, he loved horses. His animals, with their manes neatly plaited and their great muscular breasts thrust out, took everybody in tow at sticky spots. It's true they also ate more than their rightful ration of oats. The other drivers knew that, and kept their oats well out of Khoma's way. Still, if he chanced to be held up on a trip, they wouldn't sit down to supper without him. Everybody missed the irrepressible joker.

With superiors, Khoma had a proper sense of his dignity and was a great one for talking. Nothing pleased him better than to wag his chin with somebody of the higher-ups. Especially did he enjoy meeting Major Vorontsov, Hero of the Soviet Union.

Khayetsky had made friends with the major on that stiff stretch in the Transylvanian Alps. Visiting the mortarmen now, Vorontsov always asked if they still had the rope with which they'd scaled the cliff. And Khoma assured him that he had the rope safe in the front of his cart. Because, who could tell, they might meet more than one set of Alps on their way....

Then the major would inquire how things were at home. One day Khoma had complained that the team-leader in his *kolkhoz* wouldn't let Yavdoshka have the straw she needed for thatching. Vorontsov had written to the chairman of the *kolkhoz*. He wrote dozens of such letters: to *kolkhoz* chairmen, to district Party secretaries, to the local military authorities. The men came to him with all their troubles. This broad-shouldered major with the keen grey eyes appeared to them as a sort of all-powerful champion who could do anything, you only had to ask him. And it was a fact that the major looked after the soldiers' concerns as well as after his own, if not better.

"I've got a letter," Khayetsky boasted now.

"Did they give her that straw?"

"The team-leader did the thatching himself, Comrade Major. Acted like magic, it did!"

And, right in front of everybody, Khoma proceeded to read the major Yavdoshka's letter.

"Khoma, my dearest one, if only God might grant to vanquish the enemy soon, and for you to come home safe and sound.... We thank your officers from the very bottom of our hearts, the little ones and I, for writing to our chairman. I only heard out at work that a letter had come to the office, and when I got home, there was a cartload of straw standing in the yard, just as if it had grown out of the ground. And the team-leader himself up on the roof, like a great stork. I don't know what it was your officers wrote, that it even sent him up on the roof.... But bless them for it, whatever it was, because the ceiling looked like caving in and water was running down all the walls....

"Khoma, my dear one, I can't tell you how my heart longed for you, whether I lay down or got up or whatever I did. So I say: haven't I wept enough tears, haven't I seen enough trouble, that I don't hear from him? I'll ask him to write to me every week, not to forget me in faraway lands, my own and dearest...."

"And why weren't you writing?" Vorontsov interrupted sternly. "Too taken up with these dark Hungarian girls? Forgot about your own?"

"God forbid, Comrade Major! I wouldn't think of such a thing! Mine's dark too. Finest woman in the village!"

"Well, what's the matter, then?"

"That was when we were pushing for the Mures, I didn't write so often then. You know how we were driving ahead.... No time to think about writing! Day

and night without a stop for breath! . . . Covering kilometres, not yards! . . .”

“You shouldn’t use words you don’t understand,” the major reproved. “Now you don’t know what a yard is, do you?”

“A yard?” Khoma was plainly contemptuous of the word. “A yard’s something the allies thought up. We don’t have such a pigmy measure in our army. A yard is—well, it’s something like the old-fashioned cubit. Our army only moves by kilometres: a hundred and twenty along the front, sixty in depth, and in the process our troops destroyed—”

“Khoma,” the soldiers said, “go ahead now, tell us the allied communiqué.”

Some of them were grinning in advance.

“They are advancing relentlessly,” Khoma said with a straight face. “After heavy fighting, three allied divisions have broken into a rural community. One Fritz has been captured.”

“What about allied losses?”

“One case of shell-shock. He’s been left back to rest up.”

“Oho!” the men said. “If that’s the way it is, then of course they’ve got plenty of time to write home.”

“And you write too,” the major said severely. “Let them do their writing, and we’ll do ours. Our Yavdoshkas deserve to get letters often. So that they shouldn’t have to cry.”

“A soldier doesn’t overly believe those tears.” Khoma rolled the whites of his eyes like a Negro. “I wrote to her from the Tisza. ‘And next time,’ says I, ‘I’ll write from the Danube. You look after things yourself,’ I says. ‘And don’t worry about me. ’Cause it isn’t just our *kolkhoz* I’ve got on my mind now. Got big things to think about. The ninth blow is in the offing, as the commander-in-chief said.’”

"What about the tenth?" the soldiers asked.

"The tenth?" said Khoma. "That's the one that'll take us home! 'Khoma, my dear,'" he went on reading, "'the calf's nearly six months old now, and the ewe's in lamb. Don't forget us on the Blue Danube, because we rise and go to bed with thoughts of you. We bow low to you, to the very ground. . . . Yes, I nearly forgot to tell you: Stakh is home, his left arm doesn't work, and Mikola's brother-in-law has come back with one leg, he's set up in cobbling. . . . And Oleksa and Shtefan and Prokop have all been killed. . . .'" Both my brothers-in-law are gone!" Khoma exclaimed bitterly. "A lot of our people are gone, Comrade Major. Dying, they are! Here you scold me for not writing often enough. . . . But writing doesn't help! We've got to hurry up and settle their hash, that's what we've got to do! I'll tell you the truth, Comrade Major: before, that calf of mine was never out of my head. While now I hardly think about it at all. And the same about the ewe being in lamb. . . . Let her lamb, and good luck to her. . . . Is that all I've got on my mind now? When all of Europe is waiting for us, looking forward to having order after all this trouble? Because here have Oleksa and Shtefan and Prokop laid down their lives—and I want to know: what did they die for? I've got to know what will happen here after we leave."

"That's your lawful right, Comrade Khayetsky."

"Here there are rumours that fascist officers have got into the Rumanian division that's behind us and are stirring up trouble . . . behind our backs. . . . Is that what we swept through Rumania for, like a whirlwind, and crawled on our elbows across all of Transylvania—to have all kinds of filth raising their heads there again? Why, our blood isn't dry there yet—the blood of our Shtefans and Prokops . . . and Bryanskys! Isn't that right? And so I want to know, who is

going to be running things there: our friends or our foes?"

"Our friends, Comrade Khayetsky," Vorontsov reassured him. "Democratic governments."

"Look here, citizens of Europe"—Khoma addressed an imaginary audience of Europeans. "Look here! When we liberated you, it wasn't to have you put in a lot of new fascists in place of the old ones—new fascists in democratic pants!"

Khoma was interested in everything, he tried to find out about everything. It really was a fact that he thought less and less now about his household concerns, about his calf and ewe and so on. As to that, he relied wholly on Yavdoshka. While he, for his own part, was developing an ever more absorbing interest in European and world affairs. They occupied his mind as much as if he were going to be a diplomat himself tomorrow or the day after. The men looked forward eagerly to his "debates" with Major Vorontsov. And Vorontsov considered these "debates" one form of his educational work among the troops. A political instructor of experience, he knew thousands of ways to the soldier's heart. And Khayetsky, in broadening his own outlook, was at the same time helping the major in his work.

Khoma had a quick eye, he noticed everything and wanted to have a say in everything too. All of a sudden he would be worrying about the Yugoslav partisans' affairs and demanding to know whether the allies were helping them faithfully. Another time he would come out of a brown study with conjectures as to where Hitler would go "when things got too hot for him." And he'd have suggestions ready as to where and how to look for the fiend.

When Vorontsov had to leave, Khoma and some of the others went with him as far as the road.

The wet asphalt, pitted here and there by shells, gleamed like a sword in the misty steppe.

Khayetsky stood for a time, brooding and staring at the fine road. Then he tapped his forehead quickly and started measuring the breadth of the asphalt, from edge to edge. Hands behind his back, he paced it with a swinging tread, like some grim accuser. The major and the soldiers waited, smiling to see what was coming now.

After he'd measured it once, and then a second time, Khoma announced that this asphalt was three metres narrower than the gravel roads in the Ukraine.

"When there are several regiments moving here, you can't humanly pass the fellow in front, Comrade Major. Either drive off the road and go up on a mine, or else have a fight with the other unit's drivers to make 'em let you pass. Now our roads back home, both to Vinnitsa and to Moghilev, are ever so much wider. We made them ourselves, from district to district. A team from every *kolkhoz*."

"The time will come," said Vorontsov, "when we'll cover our roads with asphalt like this too."

"Oh, those will be grand roads!" Khoma said enthusiastically. "Nice and smooth, roll right along. . . . Like this one. Only three metres wider! Then they'll be bursting with envy. . . ."

"Comrade Major, what about the railway tracks?" one of the soldiers asked. "They're not the same either, you know. Ours are wider, theirs narrower. Will that be changed some day? . . . So's to have them the same all over?"

"I imagine it will."

"And who's going to do the changing: they to suit our gauge, or we to suit theirs?"

"Well, it certainly won't be us," Vorontsov grinned, showing his strong, close-set teeth. "Don't you know,

comrades, that a train sits surer on a broad gauge?... Go ahead' top speed!... Only," the major shook his finger slyly, "keep an eye on the pressure gauge!"

VII

The men were homesick for the sun. It was ages since they had seen it last.

All day long there was nothing but wind, rain, fog.

On the acres of vineyard where they were stationed, only part of the grapes had been picked. The rest were rotting on the vines. On foggy mornings, when the enemy only fired haphazardly, the infantrymen would crawl like marmots out of their muddy fox holes, and, bending low, scatter with their billycans between the rows of vines. They picked out grey clusters that had not yet rotted with the rain—the grapes were a welcome delicacy after the army rations.

And somewhere ahead, behind the veil of rain, stood the gem of the Danube, mysterious Budapest.... The word was constantly on their lips nowadays.

The days were spent in training. Men with Stalingrad experience gave talks for the novices, told them about the way of fighting in a big modern city. The battalion commanders withdrew successive detachments from the forward line, made them up into assault parties and kept them drilling and drilling without end. These practice-drills were also led by Stalingraders. In the regiment's locality, there were little towns and villages with buildings of the city type; and over and over again, the men would storm streets that they had long captured, fight furious grenade actions, build and demolish barricades. Everything was just the way it was in real fighting, except that every assault was a success, and the "vanquished" got up cursing when it was all over.

Major Vorontsov felt that this drill was very important. The practice operations of the assault parties he supervised in person. One day he looked in on the Headquarters scouts. The boys were just having their three days of "honeymoon," the three days' holiday that they always got after bringing in a valuable prisoner. They showered the major with complaints.

"Hope we don't miss this capital too!" Sergeant Kazakov fretted. "So far, it's been nothing but these Pashcani and Jaslodani...."

"You know what the tank boys have nicknamed our division?" The men fumed. "The waterproof, never-dry, wide-of-Bucharest, wide-of-Budapest division...."

"The steppe-forest-mountain-and-swamp boys, they call us!"

"A proper Guards testimonial," the major said. "You can be proud of it. Do you think the front is all capitals? There's two thousand kilometres of it boys.... Though as a matter of fact, I don't think we're going to be the wide-of-Budapest division. You see how we're standing now? Where we're pointing at?"

"Straight at the Blue Danube!"

"Yes, on the maps and in the waltz tunes it's blue. But it'll be red as fire yet. Incidentally, Sergeant Kazakov...."

"Yes, Comrade Major?"

"Have you held any practice-drills yet? You've got some novices, you know."

"We've just received the program from Headquarters," Kazakov reported: he was pinch-hitting as platoon commander. "We're starting tomorrow."

"Good," the major said. "Get going."

The following day he saw the scouts set out across the field on their mounts. This excited his suspicions: what sort of street-fighting were the boys planning to do on horseback? The scouts set spurs to their horses

and galloped off, heading for the local distillery, which reared its chimney over the bleak autumn steppe, like a big stranded steamer.

After a while, the major went over to the distillery on his motorcycle. He rode in the side-car, with his orderly driving.

There were carts standing in the yard—all the regiments around got their liquor-ration here. Sounds of singing came from one of the cellars. Vorontsov headed that way. Among the huge barrels in the cellar, the scouts' saddled horses were wading fetlock-deep in liquor. He told the orderly to take them back where they belonged.

Their owners, in the meantime, were having a fine singsong above his head, up on top of the barrels, and he had to shout several times before he could make himself heard.

"Who's that jabbering down below?" a voice sounded under the ceiling. "Soak him one in proper Guards style, Petya!"

"Get down!..." Vorontsov shouted, adding some more to make the order come home.

On recognizing the major, they toppled down like ripe pears and lined up in front of him, hanging their heads.

"You're drilling, are you? According to the program, eh?"

"C-comrade Major"—Kazakov moved his tongue thickly—"we stormed it... thish objective... 'ccording to p-program... place got stone w-walls, you know... strong as a city... we r-rushed it... swept r-right in..."

"And in here?"

"That... thatsh on top of... p-program b-been sampling... make sure shtuff wasn't p-poisoned..."

The major brought them out into the yard.

"Where are your horses?"

"They were right here . . . g-grazing, probably. . . ."

He made them fall in and led them to a stone trough filled with water.

"Take your caps off!"

They obeyed dutifully.

"Stick your heads in there, right up to your necks! Now then! . . ."

The boys dived in like so many drakes. After performing this operation a few times, the major lined them up again. They sneezed and blew and looked unhappy—that meant they were sobering up.

"Where are your horses?" the major repeated.

Now Kazakov saw the horses in the distance.

"There they are: some bas—"

"Well, then, listen to me: I forbid any of you to mount a horse till we're in Budapest—until it has been captured, in fact. You're not to get into a saddle until the last city block has fallen."

"Yes, Comrade Major!" the delinquents chorused.

"And now—back you get to your quarters! You'll go out on a job in the evening"

And in the evening the regiment's "wolves," completely sober by now, did go out on a job.

There was no creak, no rustle, no sound where they passed. As if dark ghostly shadows were gliding over soft feather beds.

In the morning, Kazakov appeared before the major with a young Hungarian captain.

The captain told much that was interesting.

"I have come to the conclusion," he said through the interpreter, "that it's time for us to break with the Germans. They'll lead us to destruction."

"You've come to it a bit late in the day," the major observed. "You didn't come to it in Voronezh, nor in

the Chernigov forests, but only at the walls of your own capital. Yes, a bit late in the day it is."

"We put our hopes in Horthy," the prisoner continued gloomily. "We were sure he would make peace with you."

The captain said that many of his brother-officers were keeping civilian clothes handy against the event of Budapest being surrounded. All of them were disgusted with the way Germans were running their country.

"They're everywhere, those cursed Swabians," the captain exclaimed. "The War Ministry and the General Staff are headed by the German Berger. The commanders of the First, Second and Third Hungarian Armies are Germans. All our forces are commanded by the German, Colonel-General Friesner...."

Towards the end, the prisoner complained that he, a captain, had been made to salute this sergeant here.

"I am an officer of the Hungarian Army," he declared haughtily, "and here I have to salute your sergeant."

The major turned sternly on Kazakov.

"What's this?"

The sergeant, glowering at the prisoner from under his close-set can, explained that he wanted to know how they saluted in the Hungarian army: with all five fingers, or only two. Being a scout, he had to know the way different armies saluted. And the captain was the very man to give a demonstration according to all the rules.

"But you made me salute ten times, not just once!" the captain protested when the interpreter had translated this explanation.

The sergeant began to shake. His eyelids twitched nervously. He stuttered and gasped with his mouth open before he finally managed to bring out the first word. Ever since he'd been shell-shocked, Kazakov had

difficulty in speaking when he was worked up. It hurt Vorontsov to see the way he was breathing.

"I d-didn't know you were such a skunk, such a squealer," he croaked, clenching his great fists. The prisoner shot fearful looks at them. "I'd have made you salute me a hundred times! I'd have made you crawl on your belly all the way from No Man's Land! . . ."

"Stop it, Kazakov!" said the major. "Suppose you go now."

When the sergeant had gone out, Vorontsov got up from his table and took a silent turn about the room, his hands behind his back. His broad, clean-shaven face was covered with grey weariness. Deep furrows lined his forehead. He came to a halt in front of the prisoner.

"You've no cause to take offence, Captain," he said. "No cause at all. The fact that you, an officer of a perishing army, saluted this sergeant, does not humiliate you in the least. You have already humiliated yourself sufficiently by obediently serving the Swabians, as you call them. And do you know who this sergeant is that captured you?" And Vorontsov all but whispered, as if he were telling the captain a deep secret: "A Donbas miner, a man who fought at Stalingrad! . . . Do you get that? One of the saviours of Europe, of world civilization. . . . Hasn't he earned a salute from you?"

The captain made no reply.

VIII

Within a couple of days of each other, Shovkun and Chernysh came back to the 3rd Battalion. Shovkun went first of all, in the usual way, to report his arrival at Headquarters, and there he ran unexpectedly into Shura. Flushed, excited, her coat undone, she was attending to a wounded infantryman just outside.

When he had to be lifted into the ambulance cart, Shovkun rushed to help—it was no job for a little slip of a girl like that. And he put the heavy man down so gently and easily that the wounded soldier actually turned his bloodless, unshaven face and thanked him.

“You’d ought to be a sister of mercy,” he said faintly. “You pick a fellow up . . . so loving, like. . . .”

The same day Shura got the battalion commander to make Shovkun one of her stretcher-bearers.

“So you *will* be a ‘sister’”

The veins stood out on the broad-shouldered “sister’s” neck—he felt so uncomfortable.

Ordinarily, Ivan Antonich would not have parted with one of his mortarmen for anything. He made no bones about telling the battalion commander that mortarmen were scarce and that their place was with their “samovars.” But this time he didn’t raise any objections.

“If Shura has discovered that he’s got medical talents, I suppose we’ll have to let her have him.”

Chernysh came back and reassumed command of his platoon. The company greeted him with congratulations: while he was in hospital, he had been promoted to full lieutenant and had been awarded the Order of the Red Banner for Hill 805. His men looked him admiringly up and down.

“My word, you’re looking smart, Comrade Lieutenant!”

Chernysh was wearing a new tunic, natty breeches with piping down the side, and an artillery cap. He had grown noticeably more manly and robust. He held his head very straight, his Adam’s apple protruded over his close stand-up collar, his cheeks were brown under their spots of colour. He looked as if he’d been bronzed by the sun for the rest of his life.

"How have you people been getting on, Denis?" he asked Blazhenko in a pleasant deep voice.

"We're keeping our end up," the corporal replied laconically. "Never get out of the ground, though. I shouldn't wonder if after this we start rigging up dugouts in the potato-patch when we get home. Turning everybody out to drill—the wife and the kids...."

"Won't do any dawdling in the *kolkhoz* either," the others shouted. "Be living in double-quick time all along!"

Makoveichik heard Chernysh's voice and dashed bare-headed out of his dugout. Forgetting that he was minus his cap, he saluted—the way Bagirov liked to salute: with an abrupt jerk of his closed fist.

"Glad to see you back, Comrade Junior—I mean, Comrade Lieutenant."

Chernysh grabbed hold and shook him.

"Makoveichik... the old warbler... still going strong? Still carolling into the mouthpiece?"

The little telephone-operator butted Chernysh in the chest.

An old-timer's return from hospital was always a red-letter day for the company. As if he brought with him the living aroma of bygone battles, which receded and faded in the memory, yet became invested by the very distance with still more vivid colour. Besides, by coming back, these men with their scars seemed to proclaim: "We are deathless, we are indestructible."

At Battalion Headquarters, Chernysh for the first time met Shura.

This was towards evening, in a field by some ricks of straw. Only that morning, these rain-blackened ricks had still been in enemy hands. The winter crops sprouting out of the ground were dotted with the black star-shaped flowers of bomb explosions. Ivan Antonich was prowling about, picking a spot for his "samovars."

"They sowed this by hand," he remarked, studying

the straggling rows of green shoots. "Just as their fathers and grandfathers did before them."

Captain Chumachenko and his Headquarters Unit had planted themselves under the ricks. Nobody knew if they would be spending the night here, but work got going all the same. Earth flew with a swish out of the weapon-pits, straw rustled. And a kilometre off, over a little copse, flares scattered and firing sounded without cease. That was the forward line.

It drizzled endlessly, puddles showed wet in the field; the distant trees, the telegraph poles, the ricks—they all dissolved in the gloom, losing their outlines.

When Chernysh came up, Shura was sitting on a pile of straw, changing her footrags.

He would have known her anywhere. Fair-skinned, slender... the large eyes screwed up... the heavy crown of braids under her beret. This was the face he had seen on that blue Transylvanian night.

"You'll have to excuse me," she said when he had introduced himself. "Sit down, won't you?"

Chernysh flushed: "Poor kid," he thought, "she forgets there's nothing to sit on."

"Thank you," he said.

"Have you been back long?" Shura asked, making conversation. She had heard about Chernysh, knew that he had been a close friend of Yuri's. But now that she met him, she didn't know what to say.

"Oh yes... that is, I got back yesterday..."

"Yes.... Out here that's a long time." She wrung out a footrag, the water streamed from it. "Some day this has been for tramping.... A regular sea."

"A sea.... By the way, you know, I've seen you by the sea," Chernysh blurted out. "Standing by a canoe on the beach.... Holding a paddle."

"Oh, that's that photo!" Shura frowned as if the mem-

ory hurt her. "You don't happen to know what's become of it?"

"Sagaida's got it. . . . He'll be coming back too."

Shura pulled on her boots and stood up, wet ground-sheet flapping.

"Yes, that was a different sea," she sighed. "Such a wonderful sea."

Both of them were thinking of Bryansky.

Shovkun wriggled backwards out of a cave he had dug in the rick. With straw all over him, and his cap askew, he might just this moment have come from pitching sheaves.

At the sight of Chernysh, he was moved almost to tears. There's no denying it—he was very soft-hearted and gentle, this whiskered Vinnitsa peasant.

Then he turned to Shura and reported:

"Dug a full-length hole for you in there. Of course, it's only big enough to lie in. But it's dry. The rain can't get in from on top and the wind doesn't blow in either. Only you'll find a lot of mice running about."

Shura moved up to him and gently set his cap straight, with the star in front.

"And what about you?" she asked. "Dig one for yourself too."

"Me? Oh, I'll manage. I'll get in with the telephone-operators."

Shovkun looked after Shura as devotedly as he had after Bryansky. And not because he was trying to curry favour—it was simply an inner need. "They're our young saplings," he used to say, "how can you help looking after them?"

"He's such a darling!" Shura said.

"Like a blushing maiden," Chernysh grinned back.

Sheltering from the rain, they sat down on the edge of the hole, under the overhanging straw. It wasn't five o'clock yet, and already it was getting dark. There was

so much Chernysh wanted to tell this widowed girl with the sad eyes, but he would not let himself speak. He knew: whatever he started talking about, it would have to do with Yuri, would be filled with Yuri, for although they didn't speak of him, he was with them all the time. Comfort her? But she didn't look the sort that would accept comfort. She was looking hard at him, as if she wanted to see right through, and her face seemed a shadowy blue in the twilight . . . probably cried a lot in the night. . . .

She shifted her gaze to the field, dark and cold.

"It's starting to snow already," she said pensively, hugging the groundsheet closer around her. "But, my God, look what their snow is like. . . . The snow at home is white as white . . . and here it's grey, so grey!"

"It's melting."

IX

One morning Khayetsky, getting back to the farmhouse from the forward line, was surprised by the sight of guns, guns, and more guns—in the yard, in the orchard, behind the ricks and far out in the fields to both left and right. As if they had sprung up by magic!

The Germans knew nothing about these guns: the fog had kept their planes grounded of late.

Khayetsky and the rest had hardly sat down to their breakfast when a heavy gun opened up just outside the window. The house shook, and the windowpanes clattered down on the table, ringing merrily.

"That's the stuff!" Khoma shouted, grabbing his cap. "That's the way I like it!"

The Hungarian farmer whispered, "*Istenem . . . Istenem*,"* and looked up at the roof.

* My God.

Pulling on their coats as they ran, the men piled out into the yard.

Guns were roaring all the way down the line. Their salvoes merged into one tense, quivering rumble.

Sergeant Bagirov swept into the yard on a frothing, sleek little stallion.

"Get cracking!" he ordered gaily, without dismounting. "We're off to the Blue Danube!"

Shura was standing at this moment at the command post. For the first time in her life, she was seeing a battlefield and the famous infantry charge. To tell the truth, that charge was very little like Shura's idea of it.

Before her stretched the open rolling country that is so typical of Hungary. Gullies, hillocks, plains, then another line of hillocks. Stacks of maize dotted the grey field. Among them, soldiers moved unhurriedly, barely distinguishable against the colourless background of stubble and vineyards.

The soldiers walked, spread out over the field. Yes, they walked, not ran in rushes, and they didn't move in a straight line, as men usually do when charging, but cut across the field this way and that, tacking and zig-zagging; sometimes a few would even gather in a little knot and stand there for a while, as if taking counsel. It was hard then to tell them from the maize stacks. Pale feathery clouds raced low and fast over the field, the way they do in autumn.

"Is that the charge already?" Shura asked Chumachenko. A tall man of middle age with a young face and temples white as snow, he stood next to her in his padded jacket and trousers, his knees all smeared with mud.

"Certainly it is," he replied, sweeping the field with his binoculars. "The barrage is over, the footsloggers are up and moving—what better charge do you want? Why, the boys are going ahead like gods!"

The boys went ahead like gods. The whole horizon was peopled with these grey "gods." Some were moving up the gentle slope, others already disappearing over the crest.

Shura had always thought that in a charge you ran as hard as you could in a straight line, the way they do in the films. And here the men were walking slowly and quite erect; some moved straight, some obliquely, radiating out in all directions as if they were surveyors measuring the size of that field.

Shura was too far off to see that the soldiers were trudging knee-deep in the sticky black soil and couldn't run—because it wasn't a hundred-metre dash that they had to make, no, they had to pursue the enemy all that day, and then again until next morning. They weren't moving in a straight line because they kept coming across wires which must be avoided if they didn't want to be blown into the air. And they didn't shout "Hurrah" because that "Hurrah" wasn't something to play with, but a mighty weapon, and, like every other weapon, it had to be saved until the need for it arose. There was no need for it now, because the Germans were on the run. That hail of metal had stunned them, and it was some time before they began to come to. Only an odd machine gun came to life here and there and started snapping back. After the roar of the cannonade, the field seemed very big and quiet, like the steppe in the slack noonday hours. The machine guns rattled in it like the hoofs of invisible horsemen.

The infantrymen pushed ahead in slow, even waves. Some actually drew on their groundsheets, because a fine rain was falling. Probably it was this staid, deliberate manner that made Shura think of surveyors. She was beginning to understand now that the vast expanses behind her seemed to her so finally, unalterably won precisely because they had not been captured by hit-or-

miss landing parties, nor by bombs with screaming "psychological" sirens, nor by showy motorcycle squads. No, they had been covered step by step, had been paced solidly, every inch of them, by the feet of the infantryman. The infantry!... Our good Mother Infantry!

And although stretcher-bearers had been sent out ahead, and Chumachenko had said she wasn't to go there until absolutely necessary, Shura couldn't stay here any longer. She pulled on her beret, slung her first-aid kit over her shoulder.

"Comrade Captain, I'm going."

This time Chumachenko didn't try to stop her, and, splashing heavily through the sucking mud, Shura set off.

Vasya Bagirov knew by experience that once an advance like this had started, the battalion would sooner or later be shifting forward. To make sure of keeping pace with his mortars, the sergeant always set out ahead of time. So even before the bombardment had died down, the mortar company's supply carts were rolling out of the farmyard, piled high with ammunition. The farmer stood at the gate in a pair of torn slippers—he had buried his boots in the ground—taking leave of them all.

"Khoma!" he called eagerly to Khayetsky, waving his hat. "*Viszontlátásra!*"*

He had become particularly pally with sociable, talkative Khoma. Many a time when Khayetsky was off duty of an evening, the two would sit for hours over a bottle of wine, conversing amicably in the queer but effective language that our men worked out for themselves in any foreign country where they happened to land.

The farmer wanted to hear about the Soviets from an ordinary soldier, a ploughman like himself—wanted

* Good-bye.

to test the truth of what had been drilled into his head, year after year, by the little agricultural newspaper he subscribed to.

And Khoma told him.

In these conversations with a man from another world, Khayetsky felt very different from the way he did with his fellows. To them he would talk about anything, and in any old way he pleased. But talking to this foreigner, he picked his words carefully, weighed down with an unwonted sense of responsibility. For that space of time, he felt himself an ambassador of his land.

Now that he was looking at it from a distance, the greatness of what was happening in his country came home more fully, more palpably to himself. Before this Magyar, he had a sense of personal responsibility for everything that had been and was being done there, and, filled with patriotic elation, he tried to find solemn, impressive words. At home in his *kolkhoz*, in front of some district or regional representative, Khoma would be the first to wave his arms and shout about this and that being no good. If the Magyar were to hear him there, he might think that Khoma's whole life was made up of these deficiencies, difficulties, queues for a length of cotton print in the village co-op, abuses on the part of the *kolkhoz* team-leader or storekeeper. But out here Khoma, proud to know himself master and defender of the new way of life, distinguished instinctively between the essential and the trivial, the big things and the small. And about these big things he told the Magyar proudly. Was it true that a peasant, not a count, could be a deputy to parliament in the Soviet Union? What question! Of course it was true. Was it true that peasant children could go to college at government expense? Sure it was! Khoma himself had a nephew at college in Kiev.

The farmer praised the Russian Communists. He seemed to think Khoma was a Communist too. And only when the talk came round to the *kolkhoz*, he balked like a mule. Khoma fumed and waved his arms about.

"I don't remember when I saw an individualist that was as bad as you!" he confessed. "Worse than any woman! Our women-folk were ever so scared at first of getting together, just like you are—and now wild horses wouldn't drag them apart!... In the occupation days, the whole village had to shift into the woods, to the partisans—but even there we kept the *kolkhoz* going. Why, it's unthinkable without it.... What, for us to live like you do here, every man for himself, glaring at each other like wolves? No *kolkhoz* clubhouse, no meetings! Soon as evening comes, everybody locks up, looses his dogs, and you're like a dog yourself, can't sleep properly, 'cause you're scared and listening all the time, watching over your poverty. Skulking in your farmhouses like in rabbit-holes.... You tell me this, how often do you go to see anybody? What real friends have you got? The way you work it is this: gobble up your neighbour, else you'll be gobbled up yourself!..."

Khoma poured himself a glass of the white wine and drank it down in one. He was teaching the farmer too to drink "Russian style," in one go, not sip the stuff like tea.

"Do you know, for instance," he went on, "how we scaled cliffs in Transylvania? Think we scrambled up them each as best he could? No sir ... we've got a special thing for that—the Alpine rope ... but that's a military secret. Anyway, if one man misses his footing, all the rest hold him up ... and when one gets to the top, he pulls up all the others after him.... And that's the way we live too! But what's the use of talking to you—you're a poor benighted creature, and drunk into

the bargain," he said finally, and gave a hopeless wave of his hand. There was a firm conviction of superiority about the motion.

...And now the farmer, forgetting their differences, was seeing his fiery opponent out of the gate and wishing him Godspeed on the road.

But there was no road.

To reach the Budapest highway, the regiment with its artillery and supply columns had to cross about ten kilometres of bogland. This was not the usual swamp, it was a ploughed field, but so sodden with the endless autumn rains that your feet hardly ever reached firm ground. The infantry came out on the highway towards the close of the first day and started moving along it. But the ammunition columns and artillery were still stuck in that confounded field.

All over it, wherever you looked, guns and carts were stalling in the quaggy ploughland. The twilight rang with sounds of men whooping and urging on the horses. The animals struggled as hard as they could, floundering in the mire right up to their bellies; but the wheels barely turned, churning up masses of black earth. Every few yards or so the horses stopped to rest. The weaker among them fell, and once down, there was no getting them up again: they were sucked under before your very eyes, and only their ears stuck pitifully out of the mud. A horse that fell had to be unharnessed and abandoned, and a fresh one put in its place.

The regimental gunners had routed out some peasants with their oxen. Cold as it was, the peasants had come barefoot for fear of spoiling their boots, with their trousers rolled up as far as they would go.

You could not reach the oxen's horns, they were such huge beasts; but though they were harnessed to the carts three and four yokes at a time, they could not move them either. The Magyars fussed around them,

shouted, goaded them on, but the animals struggled belly-deep in the mud and made no headway.

"The devil only knows what they're jabbering to those oxen!" the gunners grumbled. "Maybe they're telling them to stand still...."

Smearred out in dirt from head to foot, men and beasts looked like strange, fantastic creatures. Stamping about among them was the artillery officer who had given Shura a lift when she was coming here. He was now the regimental ammunition officer.

Yes, he used to give lifts to others, and now he was tramping about himself with a saddle on his back, passing on the Old Man's order: not a single box of ammunition must be abandoned. If anyone took it into his head to "lose" any of the stuff, he'd be court-martialled without more ado.

Vasya Bagirov rushed about frantically, probing for a possible route. It was the same everywhere. At last he found a field track running between rows of vines. Here, he thought, they might make some headway, if it was only a kilometre. Elated by the prospect, he spurred his horse along the path to explore it to the end. He hadn't gone ten yards when the ground exploded under him and the horse was set rearing.

A keen pain shot through his legs. "That's the end!" he thought.

He felt with his hands. His feet were all right. He slid them instantly out of the stirrups, for the horse was going down, and jumped out of the saddle. He couldn't stand at first because of the awful pain, and went sprawling on the ground; but the next moment he raised himself on his arms and somersaulted like an acrobat, getting clear of the horse. The animal's off-fore had been sliced off neatly just above the hoof. Fortunately for Bagirov, it had not been a fragmentation mine.

"My Katerina must have been born under a lucky

star," Vasya found himself thinking, with a flash of tenderness for the girl near Kirovograd.

The horse gave a groan.

"If it hadn't been for your leg, pal, I'd have paid with my own," Vasya thought gratefully, getting out his pistol. "My old faithful! If they had artificial legs for horses, I'd keep you alive. How many times you've saved me! There's nothing for it, though. . . . Don't think hardly of me, old thing!"

And he shot the horse between the ears.

Bagirov did not think this cruel. He had long made up his mind that if his own arms or legs were blown off, he would ask somebody to shoot him. Nothing if not proud, he would never have agreed to be a burden on anyone. Life, he believed, was worth living only if it was full-blooded, zestful, sweet as a song.

He took off the dead animal's saddle and went back to his men.

"What's happened to you, Sarge?" Khayetsky exclaimed, peering over at him. "Went off under you, did it? You're all black, like a witch just out of the chimney!"

"I'll wash it off . . . in the Danube," Vasya replied, flinging the saddle onto a cart. "What can you do? . . ."

Wiping his grimy face, he told the drivers his new idea. His head teemed with these ideas, which bordered at times on the fantastic. And the greater the emergency, the more ideas he produced. The new idea was this.

For all the carts to get through together was obviously impossible. It was no use counting on the oxen: with nightfall, the barefoot ox-tenders had all made off, and the gunners had unharnessed the beasts—but even without the carts, the oxen could not move. So all they had to count on was themselves and their

horses. Ivan Antonich was probably wondering what the deuce had become of them and the ammunition. Bagirov proposed picking out the strongest horses from all six carts, harnessing them all to one cart and hauling it out that way. Then they should repeat the process with the second, the third, and so on.

This simple method produced startling results. By midnight the first cart had reached the highway. This was already a big thing: there were ten boxes on that cart, hundreds of bombs.

Bagirov's method was very soon caught up by everybody.

Nowhere, surely, does a serviceable idea, a ready initiative spread with such lightning speed as at the front. Many and many a one of these little seeds, scattered on the battlefield by the nameless toilers of the army, produced exuberant shoots in the very shortest time. It is a great and ever-acting force—the mind of the Soviet people! A mighty weapon, which the Soviet Army had and the enemy lacked. Not thousands, but millions of such inconspicuous mental efforts, inspired and united by a single idea, were forging the Victory.

More and more carts and guns ploughed in the dark across the soggy field and rolled out onto the Budapest highway. Strange as it might seem, the army horses pulled better than the farmers' great oxen. Perhaps it was because, understanding the soldiers' language, they all tugged and rested together, at the word of command.

By dawn, the highway was crowded with guns and ammunition columns. Not a single cart was moving the other way, to the East. Everything rumbled, hastened, pressed forward to the Danube.

At the end of November 1944, troops of the Third Ukrainian Front pushed across the Danube in southern Hungary, near the Yugoslav frontier. After establishing the first bridgehead and capturing the important towns of Mohács, Pécs and Báltaszék, they pressed westward, between Lake Balaton and the Drave, and northward, between Lake Balaton and the Danube.

"Of all our fronts, we are westernmost now," the Third Ukrainian soldiers boasted. "We're past the 19th meridian."

A few days of the general advance to the North, along the western bank of the Danube, brought the Soviet forces within fifty kilometres of Buda.

A panic started in the capital. Merchants and factory-owners fled to the West. Ships loaded with their property put out in haste up the Danube, sailing against the stream over the dark, heavy river as though they were moving over a mass of black clouds.

The Germans withdrew more divisions from Italy and the Western Front and rushed them to the Danube.

But another stunning blow descended upon them, at the northern approaches to Budapest. Troops of the Second Ukrainian Front also swung into the offensive, smashed through the defences and moved on the capital. Pressing forward in the roadless mountain and forest country north of the city, Soviet tanks soon came out on the Danube. Further down the river, south of Budapest, sappers put up a bridge in a single night. The troops streamed across and joined up near Lake Velence with the "Transdanubian" forces advancing from the South.

Samiyev's regiment was fighting forward all this time along one of the main highways leading to the capital from the northeast.

Recovering from the first shock of the penetration, the enemy was stiffening his resistance, was counter-attacking in one sector after another, supported by Royal Tigers. Against the Tigers we used not only the special anti-tank artillery, but guns of heavy classes too, and panzer turrets would be blasted seventy yards or more from the Tigers they belonged to. Every farm, every little town had to be taken by storm, every kilometre battled for.

In the communities on the way, the troops came across more and more refugees from Budapest.

One day a tall old man in a wide coffee-coloured raincoat, with an elegant cane in his hand, walked into the yard where Bagirov and his outfit were bivouacking. Respectfully, but without cringing, he raised his felt hat in greeting, displaying a mane of grey hair parted in the middle, in the style of Russian artists of the last century. His olive-skinned eagle-face was still handsome. He spoke Russian fluently.

"Pardon me, gentlemen, have you a kitchen?" he inquired.

"We have everything," the soldiers replied. "What about it?"

"I want to chop... fire for you—I mean, chop wood."

Grisha the cook gave a sceptical glance at the white hands and the refined face with pouches under the eyes.

"As far as I'm concerned, go ahead," he said. "Warm up. Get a little exercise."

The drivers, interested, came over to look at a "capitalist" chopping wood. They had no doubt that this was a capitalist, the owner of some bombed factory. The Hungarian put down his cane, stroked his goatee, and, trying to hide his confusion, addressed himself briskly to the axe. The way he took hold of it was enough to show that this wasn't much of a wood chop-

per. And Grisha deliberately picked out a great big block for him to tackle.

The Hungarian walked up to it from different sides, took aim narrowly, and hacked. The block only rolled about on the ground. The soldiers snickered. It wasn't long before the luckless wood chopper was sweating hard. Khayetsky couldn't look on at this self-torture any longer. He threw down his whip, spat on his hands.

"Oh, you . . . cheesy Europe! Here, let me have a go."

Smiling helplessly, the Hungarian handed over the axe.

"Ha!"—Khoma breathed, swinging it over his shoulder. The axe bit into the wood. "Ha!" he breathed again, taking another swing.

The block cracked like a ripe pumpkin. In one minute, Khoma had it split into little bits. The Hungarian watched his work, fascinated.

"You have Russian hands," he said with admiration. "Golden hands!"

Khayetsky, flattered by this praise, looked down at his rough, calloused palms. Golden hands . . . Russian. . . .

"What are you, anyway?" somebody asked. "A capitalist?"

The Hungarian laughed.

"I am an artist," he said. "A painter."

"And what did you want with chopping wood?"

The old man looked confused. Khoma came to his rescue.

"What do you want to ask?" he said. "Can't you see he's all puffy with hunger? Nothing to eat, that's what!"

"Hungry, eh?" the cook asked. "Tell us straight."

"Yes . . . I'm from Budapest."

The men knew that the refugees were starving.

"Come on. . . . You'll have a tuck-in."

They took the artist over to the kitchen. While he was "tucking in," he told them about himself. His name

was Ferenc. He was one of the thousands of Budapest residents who had left their city and fled to the rural areas to escape the terror of the Szálasi gangs.

During World War I, Ferenc had spent three years in Russia as a prisoner of war. He had been in Yuzovka, he said.

"Used to be Yuzovka," Grisha corrected. "It's Stalino now."

Grisha hailed from Stalino himself.

"Your people are noble-minded and generous," the artist said as he wiped his moustache after the meal.

He told them how once he had travelled in a cattle-car together with some talkative Ukrainian peasant women. They had taken pity on the poor bedraggled soldier and had given him a whole loaf-end, though bread was scarce in the Donbas in those days. Nearly a quarter of a century had passed, but the old man still remembered that bread.

"Maybe that was my mother," the cook said thoughtfully. "She's got such a soft heart... she'd help anybody...."

"You have always helped other nations," Ferenc went on. "Here are your armies shedding their blood now on the plains of our Hungary. Who will dare to say that this is the blood of self-seekers? In Budapest the radio used to rant every day: 'Asiatic savages are moving on us from the East! Hungarians, flee!' And I said: 'I know what kind of "savages" they are. I lived with them for three years like with brothers.... It's not from them we have to flee.' "

The artist had had to hide from persecution all over the city, in basements and underground shelters. Many friends had helped him. Somewhere in Budapest he had left his daughter and her little boy. Her husband had been killed in Spain, fighting in the International Brigades.

"All honest people in Hungary are waiting for you to come," Ferenc said. "I am a true Magyar, a patriot—believe the voice of my heart."

The old man told them about life in Budapest, about Szálasi, whom he regarded as a personal enemy.

"A bandit, a jailbird, a German hireling!"—and, to the soldiers' great delight, Ferenc brought out some choice Russian profanity.

He told them that back in the days of Miklos Horthy's regency, Szálasi, the chief of the "Crossed Arrows," had been jailed several times, and one time he had been put in a lunatic asylum.

"Queer how fascism brings all this scum to the surface," he mused. "The degenerate Hitler, the drug-fiend Goering, the numskull bandit Szálasi. . . . I suppose it's the rotten atmosphere of fascism that breeds these microbes. But real democracy will kill them, like the sun!"

Ferenc felt better now. He told the soldiers an episode that all Budapest knew—the story of how Szálasi had spoken over the radio. "Rumania has betrayed us and all of Europe!" he had screamed. "She has capitulated before Stalin's soldiers! Take an example, Magyars, from Iron Finland!"

And the next day, "Iron Finland" had surrendered too. After that, the Nazis didn't let their flunkey near the microphone any more.

When Szálasi and his henchmen seized power, they staged a farce of swearing allegiance to the crown of St. Stephen at the Royal Palace in Buda. The ceremony was broadcast. Suddenly, when the announcer stopped for breath, a grim voice sounded in the ether: "Magyars! Remember how in June 1938 Szálasi was arraigned before the courts!"

"That unknown patriot's voice was the voice of truth itself," Ferenc said. "I hope that scoundrel Szálasi will again face the judgment of our people."

"Only this time you must judge him better," Khoma remarked, with the breezy assurance of a practised man of law. "What sort of trial was that if they let him off alive?"

The soldiers took a liking to the artist.

He too got used to them after a while and trundled along from somewhere a little baby-carriage piled with rolls of canvas, paper, paints. He had no other property.

When the men were off duty, he showed them his albums with drawings of Budapest. They were drawings of ruins—shattered porticos and arches, bits of churches, embankments. Under one of the drawings, something was written in Hungarian.

"The Angered Danube," Ferenc translated bitterly. "These are my indictments. In the new, democratic Hungary I shall present them to the judges. Szálasi is blowing up the bridges himself."

Ferenc tried to help the men in everything they did. He didn't want to be a sponger. Only he was terribly unpractical, and Grisha had no end of a job teaching him to peel potatoes and grind meat for rissoles. But with the good nature that is peculiar to our people, the soldiers appreciated the fact that Ferenc did want to help. They were kind to the old man, and when they sat down to a meal, each called to Ferenc to come and eat out of his billycan. They didn't mind at all that he was always praising his Hungary, with which they were at war.

"We respect the patriotism of every nation, because we are patriots ourselves," Bagirov said.

Most of the time Ferenc would sit with Khayetsky. Though he liked to laugh at everybody, Khoma awakened everyone's sympathies by the good-fellowship that seemed to be in his very blood.

One day he asked if Ferenc wouldn't make a drawing of him "for posterity to remember him by." The artist agreed, and within a few minutes he had immortal-

ized Khoma on a sheet of rough paper. Sitting for his portrait, Khayetsky, with his round cheeks and prominent eyes, puffed out his face still more in order to look formidable. He wanted to be pictured with his horse, and, holding his cob by the bridle, gave him a flick on the teeth every once in a while so that the beast should look impressive too. His left hand he put on the grip of the knife hanging at his belt. His whiskers were turned up bravely, his cap perched far over on the side.

"Make me look like Kotovsky, the Civil War hero," he bid Ferenc. "And get the horse's neck good and arched!"

He blew and rolled his eyes. But Ferenc lent his face the simple-hearted, good-natured roguishness of a Colas Breugnon. All the same, Khoma was pleased with his portrait.

"It does look like me!" he said. "And the horse too is just like real. You've got clever hands, Ferenc." Khoma addressed the artist in the informal second person singular. He did that to all foreigners, for some reason. "I tell you, Ferenc, you've got . . . silver hands. *Keszenem szépen.*"*

Ferenc glanced down smiling at his hands—white, as if they were indeed made of silver.

XI

The enemy was retreating in haste towards Budapest, mining the highway behind him.

The mortarmen pushed across the fields with the barrels and bipods on their shoulders. They didn't trouble to pack them on the horses—very soon, they knew, they'd be stopping at a new line to beat off a counter attack. The infantry had been fighting all night for some place ahead that poked up factory chimneys into the

* Thank you.

sky. Wounded infantrymen plodding to the rear said those were the chimneys of the northwestern suburbs of Pest.

The morning was grey and dull. A cold, prickly rain was falling. The ground was coated with a crust of ice. Frozen shoots of wheat crunched underfoot like slivers of green glass. The groundsheets on the men's shoulders rattled at every movement.

Next to the mortarmen were the regimental gunners with their horse-drawn guns. The drivers shouted from the saddles that they could see the Blue Danube. A young artillery lieutenant, Sasha Sivertsev, caught up with Chernysh. They'd been in hospital together and had come back together too.

"You shine a mile off, Zhenya, as if you were a knight in armour," Sivertsev said, fingering Chernysh's frosty, gleaming leather coat. "Where did you get the thing?"

"Swapped it with Grigoryan for my overcoat. Did I lose out on the deal, d'you think?"

"Depends how you feel at night.... Your teeth chatter, eh?"

"Oh no, they don't! If anything, I'm hot."

"I've been noticing, you're all afire, all aflame. There's something fishy about it, Zhenya, my lad...."

Chernysh gave him a thump on the back—possibly because Sivertsev had guessed.

Yes, it was true that for days now Chernysh had been walking on air. He didn't know what the reason was, or maybe he didn't care to admit it.

At Headquarters the night before, he had been talking to Shura again. He told her how, when he was in hospital, he had straightened out Bryansky's notes to send them to the War Department.

"So many ideas he's got in them, and such wonderful ideas!" he said in a rush of feeling.

"You think there'll be another war some day?" Shura asked, her face clouding.

"I hope not. But our hard-won experience is worth preserving. It won't hurt. After all, it took blood to gain it."

Shura sighed.

"Zhenya," she said after a long pause, "you . . . you're a real friend."

Going back to the mortar-post, he could hear the words in the dark autumn night. Day started breaking, quickly, as if it were spring. And all of that rosy morning light seemed to ring over the steppe like a lute-string. A white gull dived out of the clear vault of the sky, flashed past and flew on.

No, he wouldn't admit anything, not even to himself. That would be too much.

"What are you thinking about, Zhenya?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . about the Danube . . . what it's like in springtime . . . Makoveichik, what's it like in the spring, do you think?" Makoveichik was now Chernysh's own telephone-operator, and was walking just in front with the reel of wire on his back. He turned round, flushed, eager, lashed by the rain. Hoarfrost hung on his eyebrows.

"Oh, it's like the Dnieper, Comrade Lieutenant . . ."

"Yes, of course, you're from the Dnieper . . ."

"Not quite, Comrade Lieutenant . . . We're twenty kilometres off. Out in the steppe, we are, without any river at all. But one time Mother got horses in the *kolkhoz* and we went over to my aunt in Perevoloshino for Whitsun. You know Perevoloshino, where Menshikov drowned Mazeppa and the Swedes?"

"Yes, I know," Chernysh laughed.

"Well, there we are, driving along the steppe, the sun beating down, and we're raising such a dust! And way ahead I see something white as white, and further

still, it's blue as blue, like flax flowering right at the edge of the world. 'Mum,' I ask, 'is that flax flowering?'—and Mother laughs. 'That's the Dnieper, lad,' she says. 'And why is it so blue?' 'From the sky, they say!'

"And you think the Danube's like that too?"

"Well, why not? . . . In the summer maybe it is . . . from the sky. The sky is blue all over."

"And now it's like steel," Sivertsev broke in. "Like the Neva." (Sivertsev hailed from Leningrad.) "You know; rivers have moods, just like people. When it's fine, they're blue, and if the world's gloomy, they look dark too. . . ."

Swinging round the corner of the brick houses ahead, a waggon drove into the field, drawn by a pair of heavy Hungarian dray horses. When it came closer, the mortarmen crowded about it. Chernysh had already recognized Shovkun, who was sitting in front with his tommy gun on his back and the reins held taut in his hands. His whiskers were frozen, and his face looked black. Ivan Antonich bent over the waggon. Coming up to it, Chernysh gave a start: lying side by side under a turned-back groundsheet were Speransky and Shura. The captain was staring sideways with glazed, uncomprehending eyes, and emitting low, barely audible groans. Shura, white as marble, was without her beret; her braid had slipped down and was covered with rime.

"Zhenya! . . ." her bloodless lips whispered when she caught sight of Chernysh. "Zhenya. . . ."

But she said nothing more, only looked at him intently, as if she wanted to warn him about something before she went.

"Go as fast as you can, but look out for mines," Ivan Antonich said, and Shovkun started the horses. Ivan Antonich took the stiff groundsheet by the loose corner and put it over the captain and Shura like a lid.

Chernysh trudged on, dark as the night. His boots

crunched over the ice. What had she wanted to say to him? Why hadn't she said it?"

"They'll get better and come back," Sasha Sivertsev brought out hollowly, tramping next to him—but to Chernysh it seemed as if the voice came from a long way off. "We came back, didn't we?..."

Chernysh went on silently, glancing back occasionally over his shoulder. The waggon had disappeared in a gully. Winding with the road, all the way to the horizon, ran lines of ice-coated telegraph poles. The enemy hadn't had time to cut them down. Far over on the left wing, grizzly tanks were pushing over the ground, rocking like ships on the sea. Parties of infantry plodded ahead, scattered all over the field; and leaning forward against the wind, the men put one in mind of grey steppe eagles.

Later on, Chernysh heard from the battalion commander how the thing had happened.

Inspecting the positions in the dark, Speransky had run into a mine. Shura happened to be nearby, with one of the rifle companies. Hearing the explosion, and then a scream, she rushed to help. It was a wonder that she hadn't been blown up too. Speransky's legs had been badly cut about, and Shura started dressing the wounds on the spot. Enemy machine guns, emplaced in some outlying houses not far off, opened fire, taking aim in the dark by the sound of the wounded man's groans. Shura hauled the captain onto her back and crawled off with him. Soon she was hit in the arm, above the elbow. The arm gave way. Speransky evidently guessed what had happened and told her to leave him and go on by herself. Shura refused. The captain, suppressing a groan and swearing foully, pulled out his pistol:

"Go, I tell you . . . I'll shoot. . . ."

Shura tried silently to drag him along with one hand. That was the way they were found by the men

that the rifle company commander sent along. One of them swung the captain onto his back, another picked up Shura like a child and rushed with her towards the trenches. Just before they got there, she was hit again by two bullets: in the right arm and in the thigh.

Shovkun got hold of a Hungarian waggon and put both of them in it.

Lying side by side, they did not say a word about the past, although Speransky suspected that it was Shura herself who had complained about him to Vorontsov.

But all that was such a long way off, and so unimportant. It did not matter now.

XII

On the twenty-fifth of December, 1944, the Soviet forces captured the town of Esztergom, northwest of Budapest. In this area Third Ukrainian forces, having skirted the Hungarian capital from the west, linked up with the Second Ukrainian troops coming to meet them.

Budapest was surrounded.

A day later, the huge ring was cut in two. One part of the enemy army was bottled up in the Danube woods and hills north of the capital, and there gradually destroyed. The other, main part, was hemmed in in Budapest itself. On December twenty-seventh, fighting started on the outskirts of the city—it was the beginning of the famous storming of Budapest, which lasted nearly two months.

The Germans attached tremendous importance to holding the city. A road and railway hub, Budapest was the strategic gateway to Austria, Czechoslovakia and the southern provinces of Germany itself, which the Germans had until quite recently regarded as far

in their interior. The fall of the Hungarian capital would inevitably rob Hitler of his last and most tenacious satellite. It would shake the whole southern end of the German front, which still hung over the Balkans.

So it was not surprising that the Nazi High Command had brought up masses of troops to Budapest, had moved its best reserves here. The German generals promised that at the walls of Budapest they would repay with interest for Stalingrad. Somebody had already seen German leaflets—illiterate and fatuous as usual—in which the Führer bragged that though he might surrender Berlin, he was damn well going to pitch the Third Ukrainian into the Danube.

And now this vast city of two hundred square kilometres, crammed with troops and equipment, and with factories still turning out tanks and shells, was gripped in a vice of steel.

The ninth Stalin blow was getting under way.

All through the night of December 28th and the morning of December 29th, the powerful army loudspeakers in our forward lines broadcast to the surrounded troops a message from the Soviet command.

They announced that on December 29th, at 11 a.m., Moscow time, Soviet messengers would come to the enemy positions to present an ultimatum. In order to preserve Budapest from destruction, to save its historical memorials, its treasures of culture and art, and avoid heavy civilian casualties, the Soviet command offered the surrounded army generous terms of surrender.

At 11 a. m. sharp on the 29th, a passenger car set out in the direction of the Kispest suburb of Budapest. It was flying a large white flag. In the car was an officer with the text of the ultimatum signed by the commanders of both the Ukrainian fronts. All along his route, silence fell. Our troops had been warned to cease fire in this area. The Germans too were well aware of our mes-

senger's route. The white flag over the car was visible a long way off. Yet when the car reached the enemy forward positions, German machine guns opened up on it from every window and attic.

The messenger was killed.

At the same time, on the other bank of the Danube, a second messenger with an interpreter was sent into Buda. Here the pattern of events was somewhat different. The Germans let the messenger through and guided him to their Headquarters. At Headquarters, their commanders informed him that they refused to accept the ultimatum and allowed him, with all the forms of politeness, to take his departure. He did not know when he went that orders from the men he had just been speaking to were flashing to the forward lines, racing ahead of him along the wires. And as he was returning to our zone, the Germans fired at his back. This messenger too was killed. The interpreter escaped by some miracle.

Only the Nazis were capable of such a thing. They had started as bandits, and were ending as bandits. Since time immemorial, the person of messengers bearing a flag of truce had been held inviolate in all wars. And now our messengers lay dead on the right and left banks of the Danube, in the suburbs of a European capital. The white flags that were to save the lives of thousands and preserve the huge city from destruction fell tattered onto the wet road. Now only one course remained: vengeance! A wave of wrathful indignation swept our troops at the foul murder. The witnesses of the messengers' death, the men in the forward lines, looked out grimly from under their caps at the enormous alien city. Grimly they filled ammunition drums and charged heavy grenades. The gunners man-hauled their guns into basements, into yards, around house-corners. Thousands of barrels pointed upward, waiting for the order.

"Look to yourself, you hellhound!" the soldiers said.
"Don't expect quarter now!"

The murder of the messengers was a vicious challenge. Trapped with no hope of escape, the army of vandals was still true to pattern. Nothing was sacred to it. What did it care for this city, for its people? Doomed to destruction itself, it meant to draw everything after it. It flung down the challenge....

And thousands of Soviet guns took it up. The grey buildings shook like living things. The damp air quivered in the scorching blast. Flinging out giant tongues of flame, Budapest became enveloped for fifty days and nights in a pall of acrid smoke.

XIII

The fighting in the streets was on.

Since the battle in the city had begun, quite a few changes had taken place in Bryansky's mortar company. Now the company was no longer divided into a first and a second echelon. Under city conditions, the need for such a division disappeared. All the supplying was done direct from the regimental depots. In general, the whole flexible army organism had contracted here till it was taut as a muscle. The Headquarters units and supply bases, which under field conditions were kept some distance behind the front line, as ordered by the regulations, could here be located right next to the forward positions, a block or two away.

Now that he'd brought the whole company together, Ivan Antonich put the supply men on firing too. Sergeant Bagirov was commanding a platoon for the time being, and hoping in secret that he might be given an assault party to lead. The mortarmen had such assault parties already trained—Bagirov himself had been drilling

them, when there was time, in street fighting according to the Stalingrad rules. The only man left in the rear was Grisha, who had taken the place of the shell-shocked cook at the Battalion Headquarters kitchen.

Chernysh was engaged, as before, mostly in correcting the fire. Even Ivan Antonich, exacting as he was, thought well of his work.

Just now Chernysh was standing in the attic of a tall house and observing through a dormer window. The object of his observations was the city cemetery. It lay a block away, with a stone wall around it. In the ruins of some brick houses facing the wall, on this side of the street, the battalion's rifle squads were lying.

A view of the great city unfolded before Chernysh.

After weeks of rain and fog, the weather was mending at last, and our planes hovered over Budapest morning, noon and night. There were still hundreds of factory chimneys smoking in the surrounded city, thrust upward like the barrels of so many siege guns. The factories were still turning out tanks, armoured cars, thousands of shells for the surrounded troops; and in one part of the city after another, our aircraft sent bombs crashing down on them. The earth's crust seemed to be cracking, down to its very bowels. The flames of pale daylight fires leapt in many places over the chasms between the city blocks.

The sky, neither dark nor blue, was overspread with a sort of lofty white veil, so that the cold silvery sunlight seemed to be coming through a great lampshade of white ground glass. The housetops shone dully, like slabs of armour-plate, in the milky rays. Throwing slanting shadows across them, rows of chimneys stood erect—rows of soldiers supposed to attack: they had got up, taken one look at the yawning street-chasms ahead, and frozen into immobility.

Water towers reared over the city like colossal *Faust-patrons*. And all the way to the horizon, as far as the

eye could see, stretched stone tiers of streets—towers—spires—church domes—factory chimneys—and again the same arrested cascades of stone on the other side of the Danube.

A hot rumbling enveloped this immense stone encampment, the cannonade never ceased for a minute, roaring methodically like a huge rock-crusher that had been set going for evermore. Over nearby streets hung the smell of TNT and fluffy bits of soot floated in the air.

Chernysh's attention was glued to the cemetery. His teeth biting a cigarette that had long gone out, he peered through the narrow window, eyes searching that rectangular plot of ground with its gleaming marble tombstones and figures of white angels. Behind each of those mild angels, he knew, a tommy gunner was hiding. Chernysh was looking for the enemy machine guns. The rifle company commander had been cursing over the phone ever since the morning: those machine guns gave him no chance to do anything. Chernysh had managed to silence several, but others came to life in their place.

In the right-hand corner of the cemetery stood a little circular chapel, like a tubby old lady. Under its roof, Chernysh's eye caught a barely noticeable flash. He made his computation rapidly and called to Makoveichik to pass it on.

Makoveichik was crouching under a rafter, huddled over his phone. He shouted the figures into the mouthpiece.

Chernysh watched anxiously as the bombs burst around the chapel. At last one landed on the roof.

"Take that!" he ground out through his teeth.

The chapel was smoking.

At another window in this attic stood Sasha Sivertsev—he was a tall boy, with curly fair hair and golden sideburns. Sivertsev was observing a different sector, collecting information for his battery. Once in a while he'd call across to Chernysh:

"What does it look like in your telescope, Zhenya?"

"A lot of this filth here."

"Give it to them hot...."

"Trying to."

A burst of fire slashed across the roof, like a stroke of lightning. Sivertsev fell forward, covering his head with his hands, as if that were the one thing he wanted to protect. A heavy bomb bursting on the rafter lit up the whole attic. Fragments whistled through a cloud of smoke and dust. Sivertsev got up, rubbed his eyes—quick, mobile eyes that took in everything at once. His sideburns were dusted grey.

"You alive, Zhenya?" he shouted.

"I think so."

Picking the cobwebs off their clothes and faces, they headed towards each other.

"I say, do you think they've got our number?" Sivertsev asked anxiously. "Are they going to smoke us out of this place?"

"What are you shelling?" Chernysh questioned in return.

"Number seventeen. It's alight already...."

They lit cigarettes and squatted down.

Sivertsev had told Chernysh a great deal about Leningrad and the tragedy of the blockade. Before the war, he was just out of secondary school and dreaming of going to an art school. He knew not only Leningrad, but Pushkino, Gatchina and Peterhof too as well as he did his own home. All the palaces, monuments, walks, statues. . . . He spoke in detail about them to Chernysh, even asked what he thought would be the best way to go about restoring this or that palace. Carried away by his eagerness, he forgot that Chernysh did not come from Leningrad and did not know everything there.

"What, you don't know the statue of Samson?" he

would exclaim in genuine amazement. "You must be joking, Zhenya! . . ."

He thought of everybody as Leningraders like himself. Sometimes he would start in:

"By the way, you know, Zhenya, they've rebuilt the Hermitage Museum."

He knew perfectly well that that wasn't so: but his quick imagination was already patching up the bomb-craters in the Leningrad squares, restoring the Hermitage, bringing ships into the port. He saw everything back in its place. And Chernysh, listening to his touching fancies, would say, "Yes, yes," and smile wryly.

As they sat, puffing at their cigarettes, under this Budapest roof, it occurred to Chernysh that his Leningrader friend probably felt like sweeping all this from the face of the earth. Sivertsev had announced with such exultation that his Number Seventeen target was already alight!

"I say, Sasha, don't you sometimes feel that for all they did . . . for Peterhof . . . for the ruins of Leningrad . . . you want to—you know—do the same here?" Chernysh nodded towards the window. "Plough it all up—raze it to the ground? Don't you? . . ."

Sivertsev thought for a moment, and his boyish face looked more mature.

"No," he answered with a sigh. "No. After all, it wasn't the Budapest museum that bombed the Hermitage. I know well enough who did it."

"Well, I know I feel that way sometimes."

"Don't talk rot, Zhenya. As if I didn't know you! Incidentally, did Ferenc show you his photographs of the Danube bridges? Such beauties!"

"The Széllasists have blown them up."

"What?" Sivertsev asked in horror. "Who told you?"

"Some people got through the lines yesterday."

Sivertsev didn't speak for a while.

"The Chain Bridge?" he said slowly.

"It's gone."

"Erzsébet-híd?"

"Gone."

"Ferenc-József-híd?"

"Gone."

"Damn them, damn them!" Sivertsev burst out. "From Pushkino to the Danube! Wherever they go, they blast everything, smash everything!" He was shaking with hatred, as if this were property of his own that had been destroyed. "And to listen to them, all you hear is—civilization, civilization."

"They're fine ones for talking." Chernysh swore a coarse oath. "Experts at crocodile tears."

Here Makoveichik, listening in to a conversation at the command post, called out:

"Self-propelled guns!"

"Where? Whose?" The two officers jumped up.

"Ours. They're going to ram the wall."

The assault parties had been trying in vain to break into the cemetery. They had attempted several times to negotiate that wall, but without success. The first attackers lay crumpled up on the pavement. Now, at the battalion commander's request, the artillery regiment supporting them had sent along two self-propelled guns. They came forward and pounded point-blank at the wall at a range of a few dozen yards.

The shells skimmed low over the ground. The guns fired again and again, always at the same spot. A cloud of stone dust enveloped the wall, and holes appeared in it. The assault men rushed through and scattered over the cemetery.

Chernysh shifted his fire further and further in—a creeping barrage ahead of the assault party. As if he were paving a hot road for the men, lining it with fiery gravel,

Evening was falling, and the fires over the city, little noticeable by daylight, seemed to be expanding and swelling with blood. All of a sudden, there were great numbers of them.

XIV

Next to the house where Chernysh had his observation post was another, equally tall. Long, quick flames shot out of the windows: the mortars were firing.

Originally, Ivan Antonich intended to station his "samovars" on the ground. That meant cutting down some chestnut trees in the courtyard—they interfered with the sighting.

Khayetsky went down into the basement to find a saw or axe. He took Ferenc with him as interpreter. Like many other refugees, the old artist had moved forward in the wake of the front, all the way to Budapest. He knew quite a lot of people in Samiyev's regiment by now—sergeants, clerks, political instructors—and at each new spot he always located Ivan Antonich's outfit. The mortar-men never let him go hungry. In return, he acted as interpreter for Ivan Antonich and Chumachenko, and even for the soldiers, whenever they needed one. He was proud of it and called himself a "partisan."

Khayetsky had been bragging that he had learnt to "jabber Hungarian real good"; but going down into that basement, he took Ferenc along, just to be sure.

The place was full of women, children, old people. They peered out from piles of rags and feather beds, sat up on the berths that lined the walls in three tiers.

"Like in a railway carriage," Khoma remarked, taking in the place with a knowing eye.

The news that the Russian wanted a saw or axe started a panic. The Hungarians had been scared to death by propaganda about "Russian atrocities." Seeing Khoma with

his black whiskers, a knife in his belt and a tommy gun on his back, they decided that now the atrocities were coming. Children clung to their mothers' skirts and howled at the top of their voices. This great whiskered fellow with the star on his cap was going to saw or chop them to pieces.

"What's all this row? What are they jabbering there?" Khoma demanded sternly. When there was serious business in hand, he was always curt with Ferenc and would have no familiarity, friendly though they were. "Who do they take me for?"

Ferenc explained.

"Quiet now!" Khoma raised his hand. "Tell them I'm not going to do any chopping or sawing. Tell them I need a saw for the chestnuts, because they're in our way. And the girls needn't be scared either, I'm not going to do them any mischief."

How Ferenc translated this remains unknown, but in any case the basement-dwellers brightened up after he had done it. The young women stopped huddling in their shawls. Some of the bolder sort pleaded with "the captain" not to cut down the chestnuts—it was a working-class quarter here, and these trees were the only bit of nature that the children ever saw. Let "the captain" take pity on them. . . .

Khoma, forgetting all about European etiquette, scratched his head doubtfully. Picking up two axes, he said he couldn't decide that, there was another commander over him. Those were his very words—before these Magyars, he felt invested with a commander's dignity. And anyway, weren't they calling him "the captain"? Khoma took that without batting an eyelash, as if he didn't notice their mistake. If any of our people had taken him for an officer, he would have been prompt to disabuse them. But before these foreigners he was conscious of a superiority, and it didn't surprise him that in their eyes he

should be, not Private Khayetsky, but a captain. Shining on his cap was a great big star cut out of white tin. He had made it big on purpose, to have it show a long way off and make the foreigners respect him.

When Khayetsky went up, the women sent a delegation after him to the "senior commander."

Ivan Antonich heard the delegates through Ferenc with his usual somewhat pedantic air. He stood in the house entrance covered with his groundsheet, which he had worn constantly ever since it was first issued to him. This invariable groundsheet of his had long become a byword among the officers at Headquarters. They said Ivan Antonich had sworn to take it off only after we'd won the war.

"I fail to understand what there is to snicker about," he would say with a shrug of his shoulders. "That groundsheet is down in my name. After the war, I'll have to render account of it. And you know what those QM fellows are like!"

This was a convincing argument, and nobody was surprised that the senior lieutenant was already thinking, here in Budapest, about what he'd have to do after the war.

Listening to the voluble Hungarian women, Ivan Antonich glanced sideways at the bare, blackened trees. The expression on his broad, short-nosed face was not encouraging. He saw Khayetsky and Ostrovsky standing by the trees, all set to start chopping.

"Get going!" Sergeant Bagirov told them.

"Just a moment." Ivan Antonich raised his hand slowly.

"Wait with that chopping!" Bagirov cried.

Ivan Antonich looked unhurriedly round the yard, as if he were manager of this house and were planning some internal reconstruction.

"All right," he said finally. "Let them stay. Let those youngsters of yours, playing after the war under these green trees, have a good word to say for us too. Right, comrades?"

"Right!" the men chorused. "Right!"

And Ivan Antonich said they should put the mortars inside the house, at the windows. Up there, the chestnut trees wouldn't be in the way.

Even the women understood that firing from the first and second floors was more dangerous than from the ground. But the soldiers themselves were pleased that Ivan Antonich had spared the trees. It warmed their hearts to see the worn-out mothers surround him, thanking him for the company's gift to the children of this poor district of Budapest. Tears trembled on Ferenc's eyelashes. He saw the day when the soldiers' present would flourish green—flourish for kiddies who, living in this Danube city, hardly saw the Danube, and were not taken, like the children of the rich, to the white summer villas of Lake Balaton.

"And we were told that the Russians . . . that the Communists—" one of the women babbled "—you are not a Communist, of course?"

Ivan Antonich smiled.

"Yes, I am."

The women stared.

"A Communist?"

"A Communist!" he declared with pride.

That night the company got ready to shift positions. The crews had dismantled the mortars and were going down. Silence fell on the house. Vasya Bagirov, the last to leave, noticed a tall bent figure by one of the windows.

"That you, Denis?"

The figure did not move.

The sergeant came up closer and recognized Ferenc.

The artist stood, leaning against the window-frame and looking out silently at the city. His aquiline features, lit up dimly by the distant fires, called to mind the eagles on old coins.

Ridges of livid red propped up the sky. Searchlights roamed the black depths beneath the clouds. Ack-ack machine guns traced fine lines in the darkness. The cannonade thundered.

"O Budapest!" Ferenc groaned.

The artist had spent his whole life in Budapest.

Here his fathers were buried, here his youth had gone by. From here he had seen his best pupil leave secretly to join the International Brigades. . . . János, János! . . . Your wife is wasting away, your son will grow up fatherless. . . . They are lost somewhere in underground Budapest. Are they alive? And where shall he look for them? In Dohány utca? But does the street still exist? The Swabians and Szélasists have mined everything. Yesterday Ferenc had spoken to a man who made his way underground to the Soviet side. The man had said: in the centre of the city there was frightful looting, marauding . . . people starving . . . the Germans taking away any food there was left . . . driving everybody to barricade the streets and put up tank hazards. Anyone who evaded was shot. No signs of any civilian authority . . . a total reign of Szélasist terror. How will it all end? What will be the end of your great drama, Budapest? Not garlands of lanterns, but fires light up your streets. No gay crowds throng the Danube embankments—the stone cracks under the impact of steel. No trams ringing, no hooting cars. . . . Walls crashing down—huge things of thousands of tons. Everything groaning, thundering in an unparalleled catastrophe. Surely, the city must sink through the ground this night, vanish without a trace, nothing but flakes of black soot floating on the Danube waves to the sea. . . .

All Ferenc's best work had been done in Budapest and for Budapest. His pictures had hung in the Town Hall, the Parliament building, the Europa Hotel, the Balaton Café.... True, it was mostly the nobles that had had the enjoyment of them, but Ferenc did not lose hope that some day labouring Budapest would see them too.

Junkerses circled, droning, over Szepe Island—they could still land on the city hippodrome. They were evacuating the wounded, bringing in ammunition. Hitler had given orders to hold on at any price: hundreds of tanks were unloading in Komárom, they were coming to the rescue. What would happen then. What would be the end of it all?

Ferenc turned to the sergeant.

"Yes... it's blazing good," Bagirov said.

The artist searched his face.

"Save it," he pleaded in low, solemn tones. "Save Budapest! There's nobody to do it but you."

"Don't worry, Ferenc. Everything will be all right."

They called to the sergeant from below. The company was setting out.

Going down the stairs, Ferenc started telling Bagirov about the famous Europa Hotel, only a stone's throw away.

Shells burst against the walls, with flashes of deathly white. They crashed through the roofs. Splinters clattered on the metal.

"Like goblins scampering about," somebody's muffled voice said.

Khoma threw up his head impudently:

"Hey, you infidels! Instead of rattling up there, come down and have a bout at close quarters!"

"Khayetsky!" Ivan Antonich snapped.

They moved on in silence.

The following night the battalion bit into a new block, but further advance was hindered by the corner house of the block opposite. In the fitful red light of the fires, the scouts read: "Europa." Even men with the most primitive schooling could read Latin characters fluently by now.

"Hotel Europa," a whiskered pupil of some old-time parish school spelled out slowly.

From the ground and up to the roof, the hotel bristled with machine guns and tommy guns. From one window came the spurting flame of a firing mortar.

The "Europa" was a position of great advantage. Fire from it beat both the streets that the rifle companies had reached, and what's more, it raked the whole of the battalion's newly-captured block. The fire was very thick. By way of experiment, the men threw an empty pail out onto the crossing. In a minute, it had turned into a sieve.

Battalion Headquarters, located in a long, low barracks, was filled with hubbub. Telephone-operators called into the mouthpieces, orderlies vanished and reappeared, soldiers were clearing away the saddles that filled nearly a quarter of the place. Mortarmen came in by turns to warm up—their action station was just outside.

"Good saddles," one jolly old fellow shouted. "Too bad there's nothing to ride!" And with one slash he hacked off a side-flap: "For boot leather!"

In the corner, Captain Chumachenko was conferring with his officers about the situation. They'd got to capture the hotel that night—as a daytime proposition, the thing was impossible. But how were they going to tackle it? Of course, they could summon the regimental sapper squad, steal up in the dark and blow the place into the air. But that didn't suit Chumachenko. For tactical reasons, he wanted to capture that hotel undamaged. If this

had been the only position he needed to gain, he would of course have blasted it. But, besides the "Europa," he had to reduce dozens of other houses, and he was thinking about those. To start with, the hotel was a tall place, and of the strong old-fashioned build; then again, it was a corner house. Once it was in his hands, he'd have a good springboard for capturing the whole block.

"And I'd put my 'samovars' in there," said Ivan Antonich. "Then Grof-Széchényi Place would be in the hollow of my hand."

Major Vorontsov, who had been here ever since the evening, was sitting quietly by the wall on a pile of German gas-masks, that looked like dog-muzzles. You might think he was dozing as he sat there, his broad chin buried in the curly lapels of his sheepskin coat; but actually he was following the discussion carefully. At last he raised his heavy, puffed eyelids.

"Where are your Stalingraders, Chumachenko?"

"They're all there, Comrade Major, heading the assault parties."

"Who exactly?"

Chumachenko proceeded to count them off on his fingers. He knew all his Stalingraders by heart. When he got to Bagirov, Ivan Antonich suddenly remembered:

"Yes, you know, that supply sergeant of mine has thought up rather a unique plan...."

Chumachenko sent for Bagirov.

While he was speaking, Samiyev, small and black as a beetle, walked in suddenly with the major-general commanding the division. Chumachenko shot forward:

"Battalion, 'ten-shun!"

"At ease," said the general. He was stocky, solidly made, shaved so close that his cheeks looked blue. With a rapid glance at the barracks and the lines of men, he came over to Chumachenko's table, which had been improvised out of a door.

"Well, Chumak,* let's have a look at the map."

This "Chumak" was one of the general's little jokes, and it showed that he was in a good humour. The general was aware, of course, that the 3rd Battalion commander was not a Chumak at all—no, he wasn't one of the Chumaks that had travelled for salt to the Crimea and had their carouses in Kiev market. The general knew that Captain Chumachenko, commander of the 3rd Battalion, had been an electrical engineer of the Dnieper network. But today he was calling the captain "Chumak," and the captain knew that even if he did get a sandpapering, it wouldn't be too bad. It has to be said that, cool and collected as Chumachenko was in action, he got flustered and nervous before his superiors. This happened now, and he handed the general the wrong map.

"Come, come, Chumak, what are you giving me Török-Szent-Miklós for? Do you mean we've got to fight for it all over again? I should think once was enough for them!"

"I'm very sorry, Comrade General."

Bagirov arrived, and Ivan Antonich admired the smart and assured way he stepped up to the big chief.

"May I speak to the captain, Comrade General?"

"Oh, this is the lad that goes after panzers on horseback?" the general grinned. "I remember. . . . Well, speak away, what have you got there? . . ."

It was about the hotel. The sergeant outlined his plan unhurriedly. The general showed interest.

"Daring, though risky," he said. "But then, nothing venture—" he looked across expectantly at Samiyev, dry and skinny as a crackling.

"—nothing win," Samiyev finished in his quick way.

Bagirov was allowed to pick the men for his assault party himself. This was a luxury that Chumachenko

* This was the name of the old-time salt-carriers.

permitted only in exceptional cases. Many were eager to go. But Vasya wouldn't have "just anyone."

"They're going to their death, maybe," the telephone-operators philosophized, "and you have to have 'pull' to get in! Can't get there fast enough. Funny things are happening to people!"

And it was true that Bagirov was picking old pals of his, most of them daredevils from the Headquarters tommy-gun platoon. Of the mortarmen, he took the two Blazhenkos, and also Khayetsky. He had a soft spot for Khoma, though he was always at him for his wagging tongue.

"You damn wisecracker," he would say. "You're getting to be a real soldier!"

Asked now if he was ready to go, Khayetsky replied: "Ready as a bayonet!"

Inspecting the assault party, the general stopped in front of him. Khoma devoured him with his eyes.

"Pull your belt tighter," the general said, taking hold of it. Khoma's padded trousers showed a tendency to slip down: his pockets were crammed full of grenades.

"You won't be losing them, will you?" The general looked him over from head to foot. "A Stalingrader?"

"No, Comrade General, we're . . . from nearer parts. But we do things the Stalingrad way. The sergeant here taught us!"

The general seemed pleased with this answer.

"Come on, open that jacket of yours. Let's see what you've got under it."

Khoma undid the jacket, thrusting out his chest with the Guards badge and the Valour Medal.

"Oho! Not so bad! I keep asking the commander for that medal, and he won't let me have it. Says it's only for front-line men."

"But you got the Suvorov Order, didn't you, Comrade

General?" Khoma asked boldly. "May we see what it looks like?"

Smiling, the general unbuttoned his leather coat, displaying his gleaming decorations.

"That's not so bad either," said Khoma.

"So you say you're ready.... Hm.... Now suppose you run into a Fritz in the dark. What would you do first of all? What would be your first movement?"

Khoma stood thinking. Ivan Antonich felt worried.

"Just imagine I am the Fritz, and I'm walking along here like this.... What would you do?"

"I'd go for you, Comrade General. Because I can see you and you can't see me."

"All right, have it that way.... Take it that I don't see you. But how would you go about it? Here you are, you two—" the general indicated Khoma and Bagirov—"you and you. Let's see you do your stuff. Grab hold of me."

Khoma looked apprehensively at the general's coat, at the snow-white collar sitting close around his neck. "Got a neck like a bull," he thought. The general smelt of eau-de-Cologne.

"But, Comrade General," he faltered. "It's not... I mean... we'd mess you up."

"Don't worry about that. Go ahead the way you've been taught to. I fight in earnest too."

Vasya winked across to Khoma—Come on, my lad, we'll do the thing in style.

The men made room.

The general took somebody's tommy gun and walked along warily, as if he were listening. Bagirov and Khoma picked their moment and flung themselves upon him. One second—and the general's tommy gun went flying, his arms were twisted behind him. He fought back with might and main, kicking Khoma in the stomach and anywhere else he could; but one more second, and he

was down. Bagirov seized him by the arms, Khoma by the legs, and so they carried him up to Samiyev.

"Leave go!" Samiyev said, beaming. "Good men!"

They released the general. He got up, puffing hard. His face was purple. "Now we're in for it!" Khoma thought.

But the general was sincerely pleased.

"See that, Samiyev?" he demanded. "Even me they got down—and what would have happened to a shrimp like you? It was just classic!" Dozens of mittens were wiping down his coat. "Send them out, Chumachenko, send them out, the lads! I know you'll do a good job, boys. I'll give the lot of you the Order of Glory."

The men chorused that they would do their best.

"Some husky," Khoma said as they trooped out into the yard. "Gave me a kick between the legs, I thought I'd topple over."

"Lucky for you you didn't," Bagirov returned. "I'd have skinned you alive!"

The ground, bitten with the night-time frost, rattled under their feet like a box of dice.

XVI

"Hullo there, Ferenc!"

The artist lifted a tousled head on a berth up above and stared in surprise at the soldiers who filled the shelter.

"Is that you, Sergeant?"

"As you see. . . . Get down."

Many people in Budapest knew Ferenc. He was always meeting acquaintances in the catacombs, and they sheltered him.

He got down and went into conference with Bagirov. The "Europa" probably interested him as much as it did

the sergeant. Ferenc had done the interior of the hotel lobby and billiard-room. His pictures were hanging there. Now he was afraid that the place would be blown up and all his work blasted into the air. They'd made all sorts of plans in this connection the previous day. To the artist's surprise, Vasya was promptly passing from words to action.

Ferenc woke a man in a cloth cap and thin spring coat. "A proletarian," was the way he introduced him.

"Come," the "proletarian" said, and moved off down the long shelter.

The soldiers followed gingerly, stepping over sleeping people. Their guide stopped before a mildewed wall and pointed:

"Here."

"Everybody with picks come along," Bagirov ordered.

The picks started banging away. The sleepers woke in fright and looked about them: what was happening here? Not only in Pest, but even under Pest, there was no peace. Neither day nor night. *Háború*, that accursed *háború*!* Ferenc reassured them. The soldiers hacked by turns, cutting deeper and deeper into the wall.

"Maybe this isn't the place, Ferenc?"

"It is, it is," both Ferenc and the "proletarian" protested.

"It had better be. You two will be out of luck if it isn't."

"Everything's hunky-dory, Vasya," Ferenc said. "Keep your shirt on."

The men laughed to hear him using their pet phrases.

At last, with a hard blow, Denis broke through the wall. With bated breath, they listened. Through the hole came a monotonous, subdued droning, as from a beehive.

Denis poked his head through.

* War.

"Place is packed," he reported. "They're praying."

They widened the hole and wriggled through one by one. Again they found themselves in a shelter, even larger than the one before. All the occupants were kneeling, with wooden crosses and candles in their hands. From every corner came sounds of "*Istenem, istenem.*"

Here they were seeing Soviet fighting men for the first time, and they looked at them as men from another world. It seemed incredible that these soldiers weren't raping and murdering, that they had good clothes and were strongly armed and sturdily made, like sailors.

The "proletarian" called over an elderly woman in horn-rimmed spectacles, put his arms around her and kissed her. Ferenc was talking excitedly in Hungarian. He mentioned Horthy and Szálasi. The woman stepped forward and said something.

"Come on, Sergeant," Ferenc called.

They went. The woman walked in front. They went the whole length of the shelter, picking their way between bedding, bundles, furniture, and started climbing a flight of steps. With every step, the sound of the cannonade gained in volume, as if they were entering a roaring thundercloud.

The steps brought them out into a courtyard. Bending low, the men dashed forward along a wall. After some ten yards, there was another basement entrance, and they started going down again. Something crunched underfoot. Bagirov snapped on his flashlight—he might have landed in a mine. Practically all the way to the ceiling, the big bunker was filled with gleaming black coal. They crawled into it on all fours, moved aside a lot of German paper sacks containing something heavy, like salt, and, jumping down, found themselves in a cold, damp place filled with steam-heating boilers.

Quietly, trying not to bang or clatter, they passed between the boilers and saw an open door, with a dim

light coming through. The foul atmosphere of unventilated living quarters assailed their nostrils.

The sergeant snapped off the flashlight. At a sign from him, the others crouched behind the boilers, waiting. The woman in glasses entered the shelter. Bagirov watched her walk up to a berth and start waking somebody, pulling at a pair of white rubber boots. A sleepy girl sat up, listened in surprise to what the woman was saying, smiled wider and wider. Then she jumped down lightly, patted her hair, with a fleeting glance at a pocket mirror, and drew the woman towards the doorway.

"Marichka!" Ferenc exclaimed softly. "Marichka!"

It turned out that this was his daughter's friend, a Croatian girl. She greeted the old man, then turned to the soldiers, holding up her little fist.

"*Smrt fasizmu, slobodu narodu!*"* she said—the Yugoslav partisans' motto.

Ferenc explained that the girl's brother was a partisan.

A joy great and pure, such as man surely never derives from his narrow, private happiness, possessed the soldiers at that moment. A Bashkir who had been a carpenter in the Far North—a Russian—a Ukrainian—and a distant brother Slav from the Balkans had met here, by these disused steam-boilers in the catacombs of Budapest. And each felt in what a titanic struggle on an enormous front he was taking part, what hopes humanity reposed in him. Freedom to the people! The soldiers shook the girl's hand warmly, as if that hand linked them with the Yugoslav partisans. Khayetsky even raised it solemnly to his lips.

The woman in glasses, who was now to go back, said something to Ferenc. The artist looked embarrassed.

"What does she want, Ferenc?"

* Death to fascism, freedom to the people!

"She is asking for a document."

The woman wanted "His Honour" to give her some document certifying that she had "taken part . . . on the side of democracy."

"We'll do that after," Bagirov replied. "There'll be one for her, and for your proletarian, and for everybody . . . if we come through!"

Now Marichka was acting as guide.

For a while they moved in the dark, then the sergeant switched on his light. In front of them was a fairly wide concrete pipe. The girl bent down and entered it confidently.

"Well, Denis," Khoma had to put in, "now you'll be able to say you piped your way to victory in Budapest." They turned upon him, shushing.

Soon the pipe ended, and the party found themselves in another boiler room. They felt steps with their feet, and holding on to the slippery wall with one hand, and to their tommy guns with the other, started climbing them, stopping at frequent intervals to listen.

The sky! In its tall red arch, searchlight fingers were groping silently. . . . It was a relief to breathe in the clear frosty air.

"That's the garage," Ferenc whispered, peering in the dark at a long, squat building. "The 'Europa' garage. I know it."

Bagirov put out his head cautiously, looked round the courtyard as if he were sniffing at it, then up at the house overhead. On this side, the windows in all storeys were intact and flashed with ruby gleams.

"Seems to be the 'Europa.'"

"It is, it is," Ferenc whispered confidently.

Tommy gunner Samoilov, a taciturn Muscovite with large flapping ears, looked out too, as though from a tank turret:

"This is it all right."

And the hotel it was, sure enough, though hard to recognize: soundless, dark, with rows of balconies. From the front the balconies had long been shot off, and only mangled girders stuck out in their place.

The sergeant sent the guides back, thanking them for their assistance.

"See you tomorrow...."

Tomorrow! Oh, what a long way off you are, tomorrow! To those who doze in the shelter you will come quickly, they will hardly notice the time go by. But what a terrible distance hides you from these soldiers' eyes! The way to their tomorrow lies through this house!... And here on every floor a hundred deaths lurk, waiting, waiting....

"Roman, Denis, your rebel grandfather lived a hundred and five years, but did he ever know one night like this?"

"Is this a night? Why, it's a century!..."

XVII

Bagirov gave his party their last instructions. Thanks to Ferenc, he knew exactly how the hotel was arranged inside. He assigned his men to the different storeys. They were to make their way quietly to the corridor and wait there for his signal. The fact that they were few had its advantages: they could act freely, without fearing to kill any of their comrades in the dark.

"Everybody who comes at you is an enemy," the sergeant said.

On the ground floor, Bagirov himself and Khayetsky were to operate. Here, besides dealing with the garrison, they had to break down the front door, so that the attackers could rush into the house without any delay. Chumachenko had told them that as soon as fighting

started in the hotel and the enemy's machine-gun fire was disorganized, several more assault parties would attack from the front.

The men shook hands. It was a mutual pledge, a mutual undertaking to fight to the last. And if this should be the last night in their lives, they would, each and all, have spent it in a way they could be proud of.

Samoilov stood up with grenades in both hands and walked straight into the door. He disappeared instantly over the threshold. They all expected explosions inside. None came.

"That's all right then," Khayetsky breathed with relief.

One after another, they slid noiselessly into the black maw of the doorway.

The Blazhenko brothers were arranging in whispers that if things went wrong, they would stand back to back. They would have four legs that way—not so easy to knock down. Eyes all round, two tommy guns. . . .

When it was their turn to go, Bagirov warned them once more:

"There's a mortar on your floor. Third window from the left."

"Fourth, not third," Denis corrected. "And going to end its career right there."

Tall and dark, Denis strode deliberately towards the entrance. At this moment there was a rattle inside, a German soldier popped out of the door with an empty pail and came straight towards him. Roman prepared to rush to his brother's aid. Denis, however, kept to the same deliberate pace and swung calmly past the German, all but grazing his shoulder. The soldier took no notice—it never entered his head this could be a Russian—and sauntered off whistling across the court.

"Some nerves!" This tribute to Denis' coolness came from Rostislav, a little fellow from the battalion scout platoon.

Rostislav and another man were to stay at the entrance, and Bagirov told them:

"When that Fritz is coming back, settle him up. . . . Only do it quiet."

"We'll see to him."

The hotel was silent, with only the dull rat-tat of machine guns on the other side.

Roman went. Khayetsky got up next.

"Pray for me, wife," he said softly. "Pray for me, children. Because—I'm off."

"Go ahead!"

His body tensed into one taut mass of muscle. He walked as though on air, there was no ground under him. Tried not to breathe, because the whole of Budapest could hear his breathing. The whole of Budapest—watchful, dark—could see his figure at this moment, gliding like a shadow to the door. His knife, drawn out of its sheath, sparkled like a fish shooting by moonlight out of the water. He squeezed it in a dead grip. Even if he'd wanted to open his fingers now, he couldn't have.

But the instant he crossed the threshold and entered that absolute darkness, which seemed to look at him with a multitude of eyes and hear his presence with a multitude of ears, he felt queerly confident. He knew that now nothing, no force on earth, could ever dislodge him from here. Now the word was: at them and do your stuff! What the devil was that? . . . Ha?

Far down the corridor, a door opened. Somebody came out, laughing, and closed it after him. He approached, hobnails ringing on the parquet. Khayetsky flattened motionless against a smooth pillar.

The footsteps neared—and in the meantime, Bagirov's figure loomed up in the doorway.

"*Hallo, Hans,*" the approaching German said calmly, and Khoma could hear him getting out his flashlight. "*Hans, ich denke. . . .*"

He didn't finish. Two beams of light met and crossed: the German turned his flashlight on Bagirov; the sergeant, quick as thought, did the same to him. For a split second they stood there, unmoving, those hard beams thrust at each other's chests. Bagirov's flashlight was the stronger. The German blinked and screwed up his eyes. And here Khayetsky pounced from behind his pillar, the knife flashing in his hand.

The light went out. No one had uttered a sound.

When Rostislav slipped through the doorway and took his place just inside, he heard snatches of muffled talk:

"Got him fixed?"

"Uh-huh."

"Get started on that door."

"Let's have some light."

The flashlight snapped on again for a second, then went out. Khayetsky made on tiptoe for the front door.

Bagirov was standing outside one of the rooms, straining to hear what was going on in it.

Suddenly a machine gun opened up in there, with an echoing sound, as if the place were an empty cistern. "Aha!" Bagirov pulled out the pin on his first grenade, tore the door open and pitched the thing inside, himself darting away. There was a roar behind him, the door, blasted from its hinges, hurtled into the corridor. He ran on, flinging a grenade into each room.

The corridor filled with fumes.

Now there were explosions on the upper floors too. The whole building was rocking.

Inhuman screams rent the acrid, suffocating darkness. A crashing, thudding, thundering shook the house from top to bottom.

Khayetsky, putting forth all his strength, was straining at the huge sandbags that blocked the way to the front door.

Bagirov continued to move down the long corridor. Doors opened with a crash behind him. Breathing heavily, he was standing before the sixth or seventh when it swung open and shouting Germans piled out, crowding and jamming in the doorway. They all but knocked him over. To make sure they didn't, he slid down to the floor of his own accord, next to the wall, and fired a long burst down the corridor. There was a window at the end, and against the patch of light, he saw them falling and scrambling up again. Wounded Germans staggered screaming from one wall to the other, and more came pouring out of the rooms all the time. Bagirov chucked out the empty ammunition drum, forced in a new one, and sent a burst skimming just over the floor, potting those who had dropped down on purpose. He thought he had never fired with such keen satisfaction. Here not a single bullet was going to waste! Some of the Germans started collecting their wits and fired back haphazardly, bringing down their own fellows. Along the whole of that corridor, from floor to ceiling, tracer bullets whistled and ricocheted. Soldiers who had escaped the grenades in the rooms rushed frantically into the corridor, only to meet their doom.

As soon as the fighting started in the hotel, Chumachenko launched his frontal attack. Tommy guns in hand, the men swarmed across to that seething house. By this time its fire was already pretty well paralysed. A little knot of men made for the front door, seized hold of the leaves, and pulled. Khoma, running with hot sweat, was battering from the inside. The door was nailed up fast. But under the concerted onslaught from both sides, the leaves cracked and gave way, and Khoma, swearing joyfully, landed straight in the attackers' arms. He felt somebody's moist sheepskin against his face and snatched at it to keep from falling.

"That you, Khayetsky?" The voice was Major Voron-tsov's.

"Sure it's me!"

"Well, let's see your possessions!"

"Walk right in. It's a beauty of a house!"

Some rushed in at the door, others battered down the window barricades, with their loopholes and embrasures, and leapt in there. The dark floor gave and groaned under their boots. Somebody shouted to storm the second floor: the Germans were planted fast in two rooms up there and were resisting viciously. When the fighting was beginning to subside, the two Blazhenkos burst into the room where they figured the 81-mm. mortar was posted. Lighting a shred of cable for illumination, they looked around. The whole place was filled with white goose-down. The mangled bodies of several Germans lay by the mortar amid a pile of ripped-up feather beds. All fuzzy with the down, they looked like chickens that had died in the nest.

"Dragged the feather beds here from all over the house," Roman remarked, "cuddled in them both on top and underneath. Do a bit of shooting, then dive into the feathers to warm up."

"They're such a feeble sort of race. Shiver with the cold."

Denis looked the mortar over with a knowing eye. It was intact and he said:

"Pry that base-plate loose. We'll move it."

They moved the mortar into the room opposite. Dragged over the wicker crates of bombs. Broke out the window that gave on the city: Budapest roared dully, enveloped in fire.

Denis set the sights with a practised hand. He wanted to go down and ask Ivan Antonich what to fire at.

"Don't you know yourself?" Roman asked.

"That's so."

They'd captured these bombs—they were their very own.

"Fire!" Denis said.

The first bomb slid into the barrel.

They pounded away until the hot tube glowed in the dark.

"Well, what do you say, Roman?" Denis asked. Roman was handing up the bombs from the crate. "What do you say?"

"There'll be fewer Fritzes left after this night."

They let the barrel cool off, then pounded, pounded, pounded again. . . .

XVIII

The rest of the night the assault parties were battling further into that block, clearing their way with grenades or skirting houses through the back yards, as occasion warranted.

Battalion Headquarters moved to the "Europa." Men lugged up ammunition on their backs; signalsmen strung forward the wire; on the ground floor, medics were bandaging the wounded. The various Headquarters up above marked on their maps another important position gained during the night.

Artillerymen in only their blouses trundled up anti-tank guns and mounted them around the corner from the hotel and at the crossing itself, in a round pit that the Germans had dug for a Flak cannon. The shattered Flak piece was still there, its dead snout poking up into the sky.

"The gunners are keeping up nicely," Chumachenko noted with satisfaction, looking down at the crossing from a window. He was pleased with everything today.

Ever since the fighting in Budapest had begun, the artillery of accompaniment had kept pace with the

assault parties. You would see these handy little guns tucked away in shattered house entrances, or peering out of basement windows, or bumping over the paving in some narrow alley that, hemmed in by crumbling walls, looked like a mountain gorge after an earthquake.

Now the gunners—strong, strapping fellows—shoved out the German cannon with one hard push and put their own, Russian gun in its place. On the barrel, red stars shone like medals, and the shield sported the inscription: “Death to the White Finns!”

They were past history now, those White Finns and the forests of Karelia—but the inscription hadn’t faded, all the way to Budapest!

In command of the gunners was Sasha Sivertsev. His cheerful voice rang clear and strong. He was mounting his guns with the muzzles pointing in different directions: one along the avenue that ran down to the Danube, another looking down a little sidestreet. Sasha’s youthful face glowed today with higher colour than ever. His ears flamed like cocks’ combs under the black band of his cap. His was the mood of active inspiration that fires a brave man before combat.

“Sasha!” a familiar voice called down from above. Standing in a second-storey window was Chernysh.

“Morning, Sasha! Sleep sound?”

“Thanks, pal! Not much sleeping tonight. You mean to say you slept?”

“Like hell I did! Some night, this has been! ‘A classic night,’ the Old Man says.”

“Where have you got your ‘samovars’?”

“All over: two in the yard, two up here with me, one’s wandering around.”

“Introduced the wandering mortar again, have you?”

“Well, why not? It’s not so different here from what it was in the mountains. Will you back me up from the ground?”

"What a question! And you'll do the same for me from your apartments, eh?"

"Apartments! . . . A lot of broken bath-tubs, and Fritzes lying around since midnight. . . . How does 'Death to the White Finns' feel in the Danube climate?"

"Fit as a fiddle! Getting ready to chalk up another star."

"Szép!"*

The morning over Budapest was fresh and frosty. The sky shone white, the finely quivering air seemed white too. A ribbon of light stretched along the horizon in the East. The planes over the heights of Buda bathed in a white transparency.

Somewhere down the avenue, a Ferdinand opened up. Shells came flying with a vicious hum, hopping over the asphalt. The wind rushed by with a howling whistle. Panes clattered. Chernysh saw the gunners get busy. Somewhere in the middle of the block, a six-barrelled mortar spoke up, and a bomb burst close by the gun crew. One of the men was evidently put out of action, for Sivertsev dashed over himself and bent down, trying to get a sight on the target.

And the target was coming on up the avenue. Painted white, the Ferdinand looked like a mass of ice that the Danube had cast up. Sivertsev, with his eyes to the sights, was just going to give the order when a hot, heavy lump of metal whizzed over his head and blew off the shield.

"Fire!" he shouted with all his might, and buried his face in his hands.

The gun fired.

Through Sivertsev's fingers, blood was oozing.

Down the avenue, at another crossing, that white mass flared up like a candle.

"Lieutenant! Did it hit you?"

* Fine.

"Hit you?"

It couldn't have hit him: the thing had whistled over his head and gone on beyond, ringing on the asphalt and bobbing along, like a pebble skimming over the water.

Sivertsev was still standing by his little gun, his hands over his eyes.

"Let's see your face, Lieutenant!"

With an effort, he tore his blood-stained, smoking hands from his face.

No, he hadn't been hit. But the blast had torn out his eye-balls.

The soldiers piloted him into the hotel.

He was lying now on a rug by the wall and waiting to be bandaged. His sideburns were matted with blood.

The gunners rushed about in search of the medic. They were shaven-pated, one and all: it was their practice to shave each other's heads under any conditions, summer and winter. Perhaps that was why their necks looked hewn out of stone.

"Zaporozhets!" Sivertsev called to one of his sergeants. "Did we get it?"

"Set it blazing."

"The way I spotted it?"

"Yes."

Sivertsev said nothing more. They did not find the medic; Shovkun came instead, and going down on one knee, as if paying homage to the flag, proceeded to tear off a piece of bandage.

"For the last time in my life," Sivertsev said in an unexpectedly even, controlled voice, "I saw a Ferdinand in the sights. . . . Is it burning?"

"Burning out."

"Boys. . . . My last time at the sights. . . ."

The boys, looking away, were wiping tears with rough, powder-scorched palms. Beads of sweat stood out on the close-shaven backs of their heads.

Shovkun was putting on the bandage gently.
"Gun all right?" Sivertsev asked after a while.
"Yes."
"Take care of it," he enjoined in a low voice.

XIX

Chernysh was firing when the telephone-operator told him that an officer from the battery wanted to see him.

"He's down below . . . wounded. . . ."

Ivan Antonich wasn't there, and Chernysh could not get away. "Wounded . . . from the battery . . . Sasha? Must be Sasha. But how? When?" he thought in between orders.

Ivan Antonich appeared soon after and relieved him. But Sivertsev wasn't down below any more. By the window stood Shovkun with a *Faustpatron* in his hands. He confirmed that it had been Sivertsev who had wanted to see Chernysh.

"But that's only in a manner of speaking . . . to see you," he said sadly. "He'll never see anything any more, poor lad. . . ."

"How do you mean?"

"His eyes have run out."

Chernysh stood there as if lightning had struck him. His mind went back to a day in hospital, and Sivertsev confessing that he feared nothing so much as the loss of his eyesight.

"This is just between you and me, Zhenya," he had said, "but I treasure my sight above everything. For Leningrad, you know. I've got to see it all again, if it's only just once. . . . The spire on the Fortress. And the sailors out on the embankment with their girls. And the figure of Peter poised forward. No, Zhenya, it's not just the curiosity of the artist. It's the three years of separa-

tion. . . . Your eyes long for it, somehow. . . . Your heart longs for it, if you know what I mean."

Somebody shouted that another German panzer was out on the avenue. Shovkun got the *Faustpatron* ready to fire.

"Whenever did he learn to handle it?" Chernysh wondered as he ran upstairs to his mortars.

In the afternoon, things got a bit quieter, and Chernysh, wandering about the hotel, came upon Ferenc in the billiard room. His hands behind his back, the artist stood in the corner, looking down at something on the floor. Coming up, Chernysh saw a canvas in a shattered frame. It was smudged all over with footprints.

"That's mine," Ferenc said, pointing to the picture.

Bagirov had given him a wide belt in gratitude for his help in that night's operation. With this belt over his raincoat, the artist did indeed look like a partisan. His hat was far back on his head, disclosing his brown knobby forehead.

"Mine. . . ."

The picture showed the Gellért Hill on the right bank of the Danube, where the citadel stands. The hill was still bare of buildings, as it had been in ancient times. Like a cliff in a great waste. On the very top was a horseman, a grim steppe-dweller in helmet and shirt of mail. The weary horse had his head down, searching for feed. There was no feed, because . . . "No grass grows where my horse has set his hoof." Vizer up, the horseman was peering at the distant horizon.

"Who's that?"

"Arpád. One of the first Hungarian knights, who brought the Magyars to the banks of the Danube."

"And where is he looking?"

"Over here, at Pest. Or rather, at the green field that would years later be Pest."

"Are you going to restore it?"

"What for? Is that the main thing now?... I see new colours now. You know my albums? I'm adding to them.... I'll show you when you have time."

A litter-bearer stepped into the room and came to a halt before Chernysh.

"I evacuated Lieutenant Sivertsev. He left a note for you."

The note was in an unfamiliar feminine hand:

"Zhenya, old pal!... I'm writing to you. Or I should say, dictating. At the clearing station. What I feared most has happened. Irrevocably, past changing. In one instant, everything I dreamed of is gone. No art school for me.... But I'm not giving in. I mean to live all the same! Pashka Korchagin,* our elder brother, went on living, didn't he?...

"But it's hard, bitter. Unspeakably bitter, Zhenya. I wanted to talk to you at the hotel, but didn't have a chance. Don't think I blame you, I know you probably couldn't.

"May you see the Danube soon. The Danube that we thought about so much—clear, blue from the sky.... 'Like flax flowering.' Maybe it will be like that on the fair day of Victory. I hope you see that day.

"Look for letters. I'll write to you at the regiment. Sasha Sivertsev."

XX

A few days later, already in a different section, Chernysh got the opportunity to look at Ferenc's new drawings.

The shelter where the artist had found a nook was in the same yard with the mortarmen's station.

In the middle of the courtyard was a frozen fountain. Next to it, two horses from the ammunition supply column had been killed in a bombing the day before. All that remained of them now was the ribs and the hoofs,

* In Nikolai Ostrovsky's "Making of a Hero."

with worn, shining shoes. The Hungarians had hacked off all the flesh. Whenever there was a lull, they raced here from their shelters, like huntsmen after game.

Near the basement entrance, Chernysh overtook two girls. One of them was carrying a piece of horseflesh, holding it with care between her fingers.

When he had passed them, they spoke together quickly. Then one caught up to him and tugged lightly at his elbow.

"Your Honour!"

Chernysh turned round.

"What do you want?"

"Your Honour...."

The girl was saying something rapidly, with an ingratiating smile. Chernysh made out only one word: *Kenyer*—bread. She repeated it several times. To make her meaning clearer, she matter-of-factly unbuttoned her coat, displaying her slender belted waist. Chernysh still did not understand. The girl thereupon whisked up her skirt and slapped her bare white thigh. Chernysh blushed to the roots of his hair. For a piece of *kenyer* she was offering him herself. He swore, turned away and ran quickly down the steps. The girl looked after him with unconcealed regret.

Chernysh felt ashamed and depressed.

In the shelter, he saw Ferenc directly. The artist was working, seated in his shirt-sleeves by a narrow barred window. His braces pressed into his shoulders like a Volga boatman's harness.

Brave beams of sunlight flooded the shelter. When a shell burst outside, a faint gleam went up, like a daytime lightning flash. Now these gleams held no terror, they weren't red, as at night, but light, and blended with the sun. They leapt and danced at intervals around Ferenc, the underground-dwellers pressed against the walls, only the artist did not move.

When Chernysh called to him, Ferenc put aside his work and rose in respectful greeting.

The girls with the horseflesh came in too. Avoiding Chernysh's eye, they darted, crestfallen, into a corner.

Ferenc brought out the promised album. In it were drawings of Hungarian roads, dead bodies lying in ditches, roadmarkers by the wayside—sketches of grey farmhouses in the plain, forgotten of God and man. Pencil, ink, water-colours. . . .

"And here is my masterpiece."

Ferenc turned over the page.

A youth with sideburns kneeling by a gun. Eyes fixed intently ahead. Sasha Sivertsev!

"You saw him . . . then?"

"Yes, I saw him. What an officer he was! His men told me. . . . I know. . . ."

Chernysh looked at Ferenc. What do you know about him, Ferenc? It is very little you know! How can you know that, firing in Budapest, this tall dreamer of a youth was already thinking about rebuilding Leningrad? And how much he talked about this Budapest! Hated it and loved it too. . . . Pounded away ruthlessly and did not want to kill!

The two girls, preparing their food, stole furtive glances at the lieutenant. He stood over the open album, deep in reverie. His thick, broad eyebrows met sternly on the bridge of his nose. The girls whispered disappointedly that this officer, dark as a Magyar, was probably in love. Else why should he have spurned them? They were young, had nice hips. Maybe he was afraid of catching something? But then he could have asked the other people here, could have found out. . . . No, he must be an idealist and in love. He was gazing with such feeling at the album. . . .

"What have you written under it, Ferenc?"

" 'A saviour,' " the artist translated.

In the evening, when the cook came up with his kitchen, Chernysh took him, aside.

"Look here, Grisha, do you have stuff left over?"

"Sometimes."

"If there's any today . . . dish it out to these folks here. They're all puffy with hunger."

"Sure, I know, they've got fifteen months this year."

"How do you mean, fifteen?"

"Why, besides our twelve, there's the German three."

"Get along with you!"

"Well, of course: Misery Month, Cold Month and Hunger Month."

After the men had had their supper, there was still some food left, and Ferenc announced to the shelter-people that they should take dishes and go out into the yard: the Russian Grisha would issue soup.

Grisha stood over the big pot, ladle in hand, with a white apron over his padded jacket. His sly face with its big nose was earnest for once, as if he were performing some important office of state.

The Hungarians lined up, and Grisha gave each half a ladleful, so that everybody should get some. He grumbled that here he'd got saddled with these "hangers-on" and had to stick around because of them until Fritz sent over a hot one and got him. All the same, he took pains to deal fairly by everyone, not to leave anybody without. The Hungarians looked at him reverently. For a long, long time to come, the hungry underground dwellers of Budapest will remember this "Russian Grisha," with a ladle in his hand and a tommy gun behind his back.

Grisha might grouse and scowl, yet when one of the women showed with her hands that she had two *kicsi*—little ones—he did not wave her aside and turn a deaf ear, but promptly made enquiries:

"Is that true?"

The Magyars nodded eagerly, "Yes, yes"—and Grisha ladled out portions for the *kicsi* too.

Chernysh, looking on from a little way off, was impressed by the cook's conscientiousness. "How much has been written about humanity, about humane feeling!" he thought. "How many honeyed words have been spoken about it, and how much more humbug! This simple soldier hasn't heard any of that, of course. He is not a philanthropist, doesn't even know the word. And look at his scrupulous fairness, his indomitable sense of justice. He's dealing out food to utter strangers... without anybody checking up on him... expecting a German shell any moment. He could hand it out just any old way, and get rid of them. Instead, he doles it out carefully, so as not to wrong anybody. Seems to be an organic necessity for him to establish the truth, whether this woman really has those *kicsi* or not...."

Stooping in the line was a middle-aged man who looked rather like a Cabinet Minister, in a good cloth coat and with a bulging briefcase under his arm. Pointing to him, the women hissed into Grisha's ear: *spekulant*.

Ferenc told Chernysh that it was true, the fellow with the briefcase *was* a speculator. Besides, he had got one lot of soup and was coming for a second one. Now that he thought of it, Chernysh had seen the fellow in the daytime: he had gone snooping about among the men, offering to buy gold if they had any.

"I've got some," Khayetsky had told him. "Lots of it! A full ammunition drum. Packed tight with gold. Only I don't sell it—I give it away! Pay all my debts with it! Want some?"

The speculator had not wanted it. Now he was standing by the kitchen with his goatee poked forward, holding out his tin can. Up to now, Grisha had not seemed to hear the women's whispering. But he knew all about

it. He might not remember the speculator's face, but he remembered that can all right. And when it was held out to receive the soup, Grisha swung out without a word and brought the ladle down on the speculator's head. It fitted right over the fellow's hat. The women were delighted.

"I'll show you!" Grisha shouted. "I'll teach you how to play monkey-tricks when you're doing business with me! You . . . diplomat!"

The "diplomat" bent down, wrenched his head free of the ladle and jumped aside. Wiping the soup from his ears, he glowered at Grisha with cowardly spite.

Chernysh turned to Ferenc, laughing:

"Look, wasn't that poetic justice?"

"It wasn't done according to Roman law," the artist replied. "It was done according to Russian law, the law of justice, Lieutenant!"

"Very good," one of the women said, struggling gallantly with the unfamiliar Russian words.

Chernysh set off for his action station.

The girls whom he had met on the steps were standing in the line, and they watched his springy walk from under their close-fitting hats. He stepped out lightly and confidently.

"He looks as if he got a thrill out of every step he took," one of them said.

XXI

"Have not heard you for three days. Desperate, because in constant danger of death. Doing everything to maintain communication. The Russians have gained more ground in Ofen-Stolili-Pest. They've captured Remchplatz. . . ."*

* Where the German supply planes had been landing.

This was a code message our troops intercepted one day.

The trapped German forces implored Hitler. Hitler said they had to hold on.

Divisions from beyond the Rhine and from the mountains of Italy were ordered to the relief of Budapest. Cadets from the Berlin military colleges were rushed to the front. Straight from the train, they were sent into action.

A great tank battle developed northwest of the capital. The enemy had concentrated his forces here to ram through the encirclement from outside. Manors were swept from the face of the earth. The plain was ablaze. Tanks burnt in the misty fields like the fires of nomad tribes.

... It would be the summer after the war. Along the dusty road from Budapest to Székesfehérvár, a jeep would be driving. A sun-goggled American from the Allied Control Commission would look at the fields around. What were these herds scattered over them, from the Danube all the way to Lake Balaton? Those were yellow and charred black Panthers and Tigers, with weeds growing above their caterpillar tracks.... Where had so many of them come from? You could count dozens in one minute. And who had stopped them? As far as ever the jeep rolled, it was they, they, they, all along the road. Had all this metal really roared with engines, swung gun-barrels, belched fire? Had this avalanche really been stopped by the fair-haired boys in puttees who were standing now at the street-crossing of Budapest, controlling the traffic?

An epic, growing over with the rank grasses of the steppel An epic sung in that Danube plain in the winter of 1945 by Soviet guns and Soviet fighting men. The Danube dark behind them, Victory shining ahead. In those days, days that ran with our blood, more than

one Soviet soldier matched the heroism of Matrosov. Grenades hitched to their belts and grenades in their chapped, blackened hands, their deep-sunk eyes already illumined by immortality, men flung themselves under roaring, onrushing tanks. And exploded under them, like bombs of unparalleled atomic force charged with the sacred energy of love and hate.

The Germans trapped in Budapest did not know that, beyond the Danube, Soviet Guardsmen were destroying their anxiously-awaited Tigers, that shells made in the Urals were tearing up the German armour. They had already lost the hippodrome, where Junkers transport planes had landed under cover of dark. Now ammunition was being parachuted down to them in huge bundles. More and more often the bundles landed in the hands of our assault troops, pressing forward irresistibly to the Danube.

Chumachenko's battalion could already hear the firing across the river, in Buda.

Battalion Headquarters was now in a shop fronting on one of the city's principal streets. Busy soldiers and officers stamped through the long, narrow, half-lit place where dapper salesmen had once darted about. Underfoot, bullet-shattered mirrors cracked, and fluffy furs, velvets, silks made to caress the shoulders of Hungarian beauties rustled softly. On the bare counter, a telephone-operator lay with his feet in the air. He had handed over the receiver to Chumachenko, who was listening to a report from No. 4 Company, storming a house two hundred yards away.

"We've cleared the ground floor," the commander of No. 4 was saying. "Fighting with grenades now on the staircases."

"Where are you reporting from?"

"Ground-floor bathroom. Here, listen."

Grenade explosions sounded in the receiver.

At the other end of the counter, a group of soldiers were messing about with a gramophone that they'd come upon here. Mixed in with the pile of fox-trots and rumbas, they discovered some Russian records. The owner of the shop had already put price labels on them.

" 'There's a Cliff on the Volga'—two hundred pengös," the headquarters radio-operator announced. " 'Oh, the Woods, Mother' is two hundred too."

"And the rumba?"

"The rumba's a hundred."

"*Istenem*, what is this? They rate their own records cheaper than ours!"

"Well, what do you think? They haven't anything to touch them!"

"Look, here's 'The Falcon.'"

"Come a long way, our falcons have!"

"Soaring over the Danube!"

"Here's two for five hundred."

"All loot from the Ukraine."

"Put one on."

The radio-operator slid on the record, cranked the handle.

*A falcon swore brotherhood
With a grey-winged eagle....*

Shovkun, stroking his whiskers solemnly, took up the song. The others marvelled—what a clear, rich voice he had! He sang, gazing thoughtfully out of the broken window, as if out there he saw not a strange street with a battered tramcar snowed up in the road, but the green spring at home, with the oak-trees rustling and the meadows carpeted with flowers.

*Oh, brother, my brother,
Brother grey-winged eagle....*

One by one, the men joined in. The gramophone was drowned out in the chorus of voices.

"Quit that!" Chumachenko barked from the phone. "Can't hear a damn thing!"

The men stopped singing and took off the record. And still the melody lilted and swelled, somewhere outside the building.

"What the devil? . . ."

Ivan Antonich made for the door that led to the inner courtyard. His whole outfit was singing at its action stations.

*The lords, they have come with their lordlings.
Have robbed me of my young, my little falcons. . . .*

The Blazhenko brothers stood there, chest-deep in the ground. Chernysh stood. Khoma stood. Bagirov stood. All his men stood there, with their eyes far away, singing this song that had come floating out to them.

My young, my little falcons!

Ivan Antonich thrilled inwardly at the sight of them and found it hard to give the order to stop singing. But give it he did, for the captain was talking.

And Chumachenko, through with his telephoning, came up to the gramophone himself.

"What's this you've started here? A glee club?" He looked down sternly at Shovkun.

"We didn't . . . didn't mean to. . . ."

"Didn't mean to! What did you do with that record?" the captain demanded. "Let's have it!"

And slipping it on the turn-table, he started cranking the handle himself.

Now the captain was interfering with Ivan Antonich. But Ivan Antonich didn't say anything. He sat in the

corner, covered with his invariable groundsheet, with the ear-flaps down on his cap, deep in study of a topographical map.

These maps were a batch that the battalion scouts had brought in from somewhere the day before. They thought they'd captured maps of Hungary, possibly of the very places where they would be fighting later on. And here Ivan Antonich had discovered that charted on them was none other than his home region of Chernigov.

Moving his lips, he spelled out the Hungarian transliterations of the familiar names. Maybe Hungarian punitive expeditions had used these maps when they were after the Chernigov partisans. He located the villages of his home district, found the roads, copses, hills and gullies where he had cycled to Party meetings and teachers' conferences in the district town.

"Got it all wrong, the swine," he swore under his breath. "This was a dickens of a spot every time. Have to get down from the bike and make the grade on foot. And they've marked it level. Level. . . . Grrr."

Each time he discovered a mistake in the map, Ivan Antonich reported the fact to Chumachenko with undisguised contempt and disgust. He almost seemed ready to file a complaint against the map-makers, except that there was nobody to file it with. That being so, he pronounced judgment himself, as if he were giving a set of schoolboys their marks.

"I'll teach them," he threatened, spreading out the maps on the worn knees of his breeches. "I'll show them! Let them try to find any fault with *my* map! I'll have every house entered on it, every little alleyway. Every lamppost will stand in its place on my map, like a gal-lows!"

For Ivan Antonich intended to make his own map of every section of Budapest where he fought.

"What do you want it for?" some of the younger officers asked.

Ivan Antonich admonished them:

"Never lose your sense of perspective. The places where we've been and the things we have done must be set on record. Here. . . ." He brought out a well-thumbed note-pad. Here, everybody knew, he kept a careful record of all the time he had been with the army. The note-pad smelt fragrant, it lay in his despatch-case next to the toilet soap. On the sheets were diagrams and charts, with explanations of the routes underneath. These additional notes Ivan Antonich called legends, the way cartographers did.

"I'll hand it down to my children!" he said grimly, and tucked away the pad with its fragrant "legends" in the bulging despatch-case.

XXII

"Ivan Antonich, old man, give 'em a dose," Chumachenko called from the phone. "Make it a nice juicy one!"

The Fritzes were counter-attacking, No. 3 Company said.

Ivan Antonich jumped up with surprising agility.

"We'll make it juicy!"

His voice, philosophically calm during the preceding conversation, suddenly took on a metallic ring.

"We'll teach them how to make maps of Chernigov!"

He crossed the shop at a run.

"Chernysh!" he shouted from the doorway. "Barrage Number Two! Five quick ones! All mortars fire!"

Ivan Antonich was looking rosy now, as if he had washed his face in the snow. He stood and counted the shells as they came out. The Blazhenkos, those graceless

scamps, had again fired seven instead of five. They hoped, the sly dogs, that he wouldn't notice, what with the whole company firing. But Ivan Antonich himself was slyer than the sly. The man who could fool him hadn't been born yet.

The firing died down, the crew commanders reported performance.

"Blazhenko!" Ivan Antonich's voice was stern. "Was that seven again?"

Denis stood up very straight in his pit. Frowning slightly, he waited for his sentence.

"It was an accident, Comrade Lieutenant," Chernysh interceded.

Ivan Antonich thought to himself: "We know all about that. You're another of that kind. I can read you all like a book."

But he didn't say anything. He didn't feel like penalizing them just then for over-expenditure of ammunition.

He looked at his company with secret pride. The rogues! Checks glowing with colour. Vitality just bursting out of them. There was Chernysh rubbing snow on little Makoveichik's face, the rest were at each other too, until the whole mortar-post was one jolly scuffle.

The captain asked for more fire. "Stand by!" Ivan Antonich called.

And every man was at his station instantly, as if they'd been standing there all the time.

Houses hemmed in the courtyard, like four sheer cliffs. Roofs blasted off. Walls tumbling down. Twisted staircases, hanging on by some miracle high above. A papered interior showing on the third floor: the inside of a human dwelling laid bare, seeing the sky for the first time. A German with long fair hair hung, head down, from a grimy window-frame. His fingers, thrust out like claws, had released his rifle, never to grasp it again—it was lying on the ground below, powdered with snow,

and so was his field-cap. The stiff arms stretched down, wanted to reach the lost weapon.

"You won't get it, Fritz, it's too far down!" Khayetsky shouted.

To the left and right, the stone city rumbled. The ground rocked slightly, like a swell on the sea.

A plane swooped roaring out of nowhere, skimmed low over the roofs. Black crosses on its underside, just like in '41. Only then they had swaggered about the sky like the lords of creation, and now the plane looked as if it were fleeing headlong from pursuit.

"Into your slits, little girls!" somebody sang out.

The plane peppered the yard with small crackling grenades. There was a rattling and clattering all around, as if a great glass wall had shattered into thousands of splinters.

"He's just crazed, Fritz is!"

The rattling died down, the men clambered out of the slits.

"It hit me," Khayetsky announced.

"Where?"

Khoma unbuttoned, pulled down his breeches, bent over.

"Denis, have a look!"

A small splinter, sharp as a gadfly's sting, was lodged in the white flesh. Denis took hold of it with his fingers.

"Pull," Khoma commanded.

Gingerly, Denis pulled. The boys railed at Khoma:

"You're ruining our camouflage! Shining like that all the way to Buda!"

The splinter was removed.

"Patch it up, Denis!" Khoma said.

Denis patched up the little wound with a piece of gauze.

"Isn't even bleeding."

"Don't worry, it'll heal before you die."

"I'll make them pay for that!" Putting on his belt, Khoma shook his fist in the direction of the Danube.

"Going to the dressing station?"

"What are you, drunk or wanting to get socked? As if I'd go to shame myself!"

"A lot you care for shame...."

"That's enough now," Khoma said. "And anybody who blabs to the lieutenant will catch it. I'll tell him myself when the thing's skinned over."

Ivan Antonich and Chernysh were smoking inside the house door and listening to the firing on the other bank.

"The ring is shrinking, like the shagreen skin," Ivan Antonich said. "They can twist and turn, wriggle and squirm—"

He paused.

"—but their number's up all the same," Chernysh completed, just as Ivan Antonich meant him to.

Suddenly a tank roared past the gate, tearing ahead at top speed; at the crossing, it swung round and blazed away at the next block, where the regiment had its rear echelon. The mortarmen made eagerly for the gate, charging anti-tank grenades as they went. They were wild to blow up that tank.

"You stay where you are," Ivan Antonich stopped them. This, he felt, was the rightful "quarry" of the gunners, certainly not of the mortar company.

Chernysh grabbed grenades too and darted past behind him. But there was no escaping the senior lieutenant's eye.

"Chernysh!" Ivan Antonich called. "Chernysh!" Chernysh didn't hear, or pretended not to.

The tank was coming back.

"Lieutenant!" And Ivan Antonich swore in a way most improper in a schoolmaster.

Chernysh crouched motionless in the gateway.

The pirate tank charged blazing along the street.

Grenades and fire-bottles showered down upon it from upper-storey windows, some hit it, others fell wide, the asphalt flamed. The driver was stepping on the gas, frantic to escape from the sheet of fire.

Teeth clenched, Chernysh let fly a grenade. It hit the side. Surely that tank wasn't going to get through—get away? He hurled another. It exploded under the caterpillar track, the track slipped off and dragged after the machine like a rattlesnake; the tank jerked sideways and came to a stop.

The hatch opened, a leather-gloved hand was thrust out of it. Here the gunners landed one on the side, and the panzer blew up like a bomb.

Chernysh, back at the mortar-post, scooped the snow out of an open concrete pipe and stuffed it into his mouth.

That night Ivan Antonich gave his lieutenant a proper wiggling. He liked to call these youngsters over the coals. Chernysh listened meekly enough, but his eyes were laughing.

They were sitting at Headquarters with the battalion commander. It was the hour before dawn, a time when even roaring Budapest was quieter and only shook, as though in a heavy doze, with an occasional explosion.

"Now then, Chernysh, tell the captain," Ivan Antonich said, puffing at his cigarette. "Go ahead, tell him the whole story."

"Of how I bagged that tank?" Chernysh queried slyly.

"No, how you broke your company commander's orders. It's your good luck that you did blow it up. If you'd missed, it would have been just too bad for you, Chernysh."

And, reverting to his usual philosophical note, Ivan Antonich asked earnestly:

"Have you thought about what you did? Have you tried to analyse it, tactically and psychologically?"

Yes, Chernysh had thought about it. Come to analyse

it, what was it that had driven him to the gate, where he could have been killed as easy as that? He didn't have official orders, in fact it was the other way round. Vanity? No, he would never risk his life for vanity's sake. Revenge? He knew how much the soldier's feeling of revenge counted for at the front. One man had had his house burnt down by the Nazis, another's daughter had been packed off to German servitude, a third had himself been rotted in a concentration camp. All this meant a lot. But was it only that? Chernysh's family had moved from the Ukraine long before the war and had not experienced the occupation. His house hadn't been burnt down. His mother hadn't been ill-treated by foreigners. So it wasn't personal revenge that had sent him with grenades to that gate. It was something else, something bigger. Chernysh knew that only he, only men like him, were capable of destroying that tank. He knew that other people's lives depended on his destroying it. Indeed he hadn't been thinking of himself at all at that moment—of whether he would live or die. Some great force had directed his hand and dictated every step he took. He knew that if that tank wasn't destroyed, it would burst into another section presently, smashing everything in its path. And that was what he told them about now.

"I know what you mean," said Chumachenko, delighted to find a kindred spirit. "You know, before the war I was an electrician. We had a marvellous high-voltage network called Dnieproenergo. Maybe you saw the metal masts in the steppe across the Dnieper? That was it. It quite transformed the famous Ukrainian landscape, incidentally. I had the good fortune both to build it and to work on it after. I was only a Komsomol when we were putting up the masts. One of those strapping lads, you know, with a great saucy lock of hair."

"Yes . . . it's grey hair you've got now," Ivan Antonich put in thoughtfully.

"Can't be helped, old man. . . . We've been through the mill since then. And my network's been through the mill too. Out of the wires that I strung with my own hands, they . . . cast spoons under the Germans. They were aluminium wires, you know, good thick ones."

"Maybe this spoon of mine is one of them?" Chernysh joked wryly, pulling a German folding-spoon out of his boot-top.

"Maybe it is. . . . And how much work we put into that network. How much of our joys, of our hearts! When we were crossing the Dnieper now, I saw the mast we had had by the river. It had stood over the water, you know, and such a beauty it was. So slender and graceful, on its tall foundation. And there I saw it lying drowned, with its head in the water. Made me want to go up to it, put my arms around it, say, Get up, old girl, lift your head. I suppose it's hard for you to understand that. But for me that network was everything. Because it wasn't only that *I* had helped to put it up—it had helped me to become what I was. I'm from Lotsmanskaya myself, that's a village on the sands across the Dnieper. My father and his father before him used to drive the *doobs* down the river."

"What do you mean, *doobs*?" Chernysh asked.

"*Doobs*? They were a kind of boat. Before my day. Though it's true, my brother was still 'driving *doobs*.' Actually, he was engineer on a motor launch, but they used to call it 'driving *doobs*' all the same. Well, as I was saying, when the network went into operation, it transformed our whole village. You know the pictures of Ukrainian villages? Little thatched houses, poplars by the roadside, the moon shining in the sky. And now in our Lotsmanskaya metal masts went up, taller than any poplar. Electricity in the streets. Hardly notice the moon—whether it was there or whether it wasn't, our nights were light all the same. Right before my eyes the land-

scape changed. And I myself, Gavrik the Chumak, the village lad from Lotsmanskaya, was now the engineer Gavrila Petrovich Chumachenko. How could I help loving that network? I'd put everything I had into it. . . . And then one day there was an alarm. The line had broken somewhere, the linesmen reported. What do you usually do in such cases? Switch off the current, and there you are. Do your repairing. Of course, that means stopping all the factories in Novomoskovsk or Pavlograd for half a day or so. And you know, suddenly I felt so badly for my network! I couldn't bear to have anybody make nasty remarks about it. I couldn't bear to hear it, any more than you can bear to hear slighting remarks about the girl you love. And, well, I said I'd mend that break without switching off. D'you know what that means? The current on that network was 35,000 volts. If I'd slipped up just that much, it would have burned me to cinders. And what did I do? Wrote out a statement, like before an operation, saying that I was taking on the job of my own free will. And went up. . . . I won't talk about the technical details. It was a very ticklish job, you know. And then, too, none of us had ever tried it before. . . . I'll only tell you this: working up there—and it was night and beastly weather, the sparks quivered blue around the wires—working up there, I didn't think once about myself, somehow. Same as Chernysh today, I suppose. It was a tough job, my hands were turning numb, but it felt so good to know that all the town's factories were working on without a break, that hundreds of people were running their machinery, without even suspecting that somewhere out in the steppe an unknown electrician was mending a break, thinking about them and forgetting that the current might wither him at any moment."

"And that's when you feel a real man," Chernysh said eagerly. "A man in the full sense of the word!"

Ivan Antonich found himself thinking: "How young he is!" Aloud, he said soberly:

"Just because of it, my boy, you have no right to risk either other people's lives or your own. Don't forget that the country has given the front its finest, strongest, most dependable men. It didn't send them to the Danube to die, but—"

Ivan Antonich looked expectantly at Chernysh.

"—but to win the war and come back to put up masts," Chernysh replied like a schoolboy.

"I'll give you top marks for that," Ivan Antonich said.

The senior lieutenant had no use for any officer who, in a desire to shine, might be careless of his own life or the lives of his subordinates. "Needless casualties are a commander's greatest shame," he was wont to say. In this respect he saw completely eye to eye with the battalion commander. Always even-tempered and tolerant, Chumachenko went off the deep end when he learned that some company had suffered unwarranted losses.

"Do you realize what the country has put in your hands?" he would berate some reckless hot-head. "Not a horse, not a lorry, not a piece of inanimate machinery. . . . If a chauffeur smashes a lorry, he has to go before the court even for that. And these are men! Men, d'you understand?"

"And what men!" Ivan Antonich would join in. "Pure gold!"

Though still very much a civilian at heart, Ivan Antonich was in love with the real front-line soldier.

"Perhaps it's because he faces death every day," he was now meditating aloud, "but the front-liner has a better appreciation of the true value of life. Have you noticed that at the front there's more of the team-spirit about people? I would even say that the new mentality develops more rapidly out here."

"Oho!" said Chernysh.

"What are you 'Oho-ing' about? Take the fighting man's attitude to money. He simply forgets its value, sets it at nothing at all. Or take the old expression 'making a career.' I've heard our officers use it thousands of times, but always in an ironical sense. Has that ever occurred to you? Do you think it's an accident?"

"No."

"Because the real soldier is least affected, I think, by the disgusting thing that in the language of politics we call 'the birthmarks of capitalism.' Or perhaps I should say, he throws off this weight, gets rid of these birthmarks quicker than other people. For the fighting man is less taken up than others with narrow private concerns. All the time, day and night, he is living a public life, so to speak, is serving an idea."

"Alive with current," said the captain, "a glorious high-tension current."

"Put it that way...."

Ivan Antonich didn't finish. A heavy shell burst in the yard. For a minute or so they were all quiet, then Chernysh rose abruptly:

"Better go and see if the sentry's all right."

The captain and Ivan Antonich got up too. Stepping over the men sleeping on the floor, they went out. The air was filled with smoke.

"Who goes there?" Roman Blazhenko's voice demanded.

"Don't you know us, Blazhenko?"

"Have to ask all the same."

"Right."

Overhead purred the "maize boys," the infantrymen's unfailing friends. They had come by the nickname when they were bombing the Fritzes in the maize fields of Kursk and the Ukraine, and it had stuck to them all the way to the Hungarian capital, where there were no maize

fields any more, only great piles of stone. The "maize boys" patrolled over them evenly, confidently, not the nervous way the Messerschmitts did—they skimmed just over the roofs of the night-shrouded city, studying every dome, every Gothic spire, every gunfire flash at a battery. . . .

Over the high wall showed crimson peaks—Buda aflame on the other bank. Here too, in this very section, fires were blazing. Girders were outlined in hideous red. Over one building the smoke rose in a pillar, with a curly top like an oak tree. Like the oak tree in the song, that flung out its boughs, unafraid of the frost. On one side it was coloured a sinister scarlet. The greater part of the curly crown was hidden in shadow, could only be guessed at. But now another light started playing below, it threw that whole vast crown into outline and set it twinkling with light-green sparks. The tree seemed to sway with that twinkling, frequent as distant lightning flashes in the steppe. The crown grew, spread out, was transformed into a cloud—still twinkling, twinkling away. . . . It seemed to rock the whole sky and earth, that twinkling.

"Not cold, are you Blazhenko?" Ivan Antonich asked.

"No, I'm all right."

Roman's hands, resting on his Tommy gun, were cased in a pair of kid gloves that had split down the seams.

The mortars in their pits looked in the dark like long-necked foxes with their forepaws up, sitting back on their tails in tense expectancy. Next to them the men slept, covered with groundsheets and warmed by their own breath. Ivan Antonich picked his way among them with his flashlight. The groundsheets were hoary with frost.

Over on the left, swift comets from *Katyushas* shot into the sky, traced vivid, fiery arches across the dark

Danube to Buda. A minute later came a crash like a clap of springtime thunder.

"Hear how clear it is?" Chumachenko said. "Should be good weather, by the sound of it. Our factory whistles by the Dnieper are that way too: when it's going to rain, they're muffled—and when fine weather's coming, they sound clear as a bell."

XXIII

Pest, the eastern half of the city, had been almost entirely cleared. Our men had gone through several thousand city blocks. Dislodging the enemy from block after block, they hemmed him in on three sides with his back to the Danube. The Germans still resisted viciously.

Across the river, Buda, running down in terraces to the very bank, was lost in a milky fog. The tall royal palace loomed on the hill. Enemy guns beside it and further down were shelling Pest.

Samiyev's regiment and its adjacent units were already storming the square before the Parliament building. Tanks and self-propelled guns had burst from the ambushes where they had been lying since the night, waiting for the signal to attack; now they were raking the whole square, right down to the water's edge. Under cover from them, assault parties neared the Parliament, step by step.

Ivan Antonich's mortars were clearing the way for their battalion's tommy gunners, who were advancing across a small green right of the Parliament. Their job was to get through to the embankment.

Among the monuments, fountains and iron railings, Germans darted about, shooting as they ran. They had been forced off the green in a hand-grenade action and were firing from behind the columns of the Parliament building and the granite parapet on the embankment.

The pitch of the fighting was mounting all the time. Tommy guns trilled like the birds of the forest amid the great piles of stone. And the mortars too were unwontedly resonant today, like so many kettledrums.

The mortarmen had already shifted positions several times in the course of the morning, manoeuvring in the assault parties' wake. Now their hot mortars were cooling on the green. The barrels still smoked, as if they were breathing out clouds of vapour in the frosty air.

"Well, boys, we've got there!" Ivan Antonich called gaily. "Got to a point where there's no place to fire at any more!"

And it was a fact—the assault parties were now so close to the enemy that our bombs would be liable to hit them. Fire at the enemy rear? But the enemy rear was—the Danube.

Danube, Danube! So this is what you're like! Not blue, not the Danube of the waltz-tunes! Dark as a thundercloud! A wide field of death—a deadly No Man's Land. The ice, chopped small by shells, pressing against the banks. The dark depths seething, the water foaming as it might over submerged rocks.... No indeed, it's not the Blue Danube of the waltzes!

German shells from Buda landed more and more often on the river. Looking through binoculars, the enemy gunners could already see their troops hard pressed on the bank. Huddling round the corner of the Parliament building, regrouping hastily, the Germans were launching another counter-attack. If they could hold on at least until nightfall! A hail of lead slashed the air. It ground on the bronze of the monuments. The green was alive with tracer bullets.

Chernysh, peering round a pedestal, saw Lieutenant Barsov's assault party beset by dozens of Germans.

"Comrade Senior Lieutenant!" he all but shouted. "Let me help out Barsov! He's getting it on the nose!"

The dusky red patches on Chernysh's cheeks glowed bright and stood out.

"Let us, Comrade Senior Lieutenant!" the men cried. Ivan Antonich let them.

Chernysh held up his tommy gun.

"1st platoon! Follow me!"

Bending low, the men sped forward like a flock of heavy birds. Chernysh, running hard, bumped into a soldier on the ground. The soldier was crawling along, dragging his tommy gun after him and leaving a bloody trail on the snow. The trail was bright, blazing.

"Where's the dressing station?" the man asked, lifting his head. He was without his padded jacket, in only a blouse. "Where's the dressing station?"

"Over there!" Without stopping, Chernysh waved towards the rear.

"Do your stuff, boys!" the wounded soldier called. "The place is just crawling with them behind that Parliament house. Do your stuff, brothers...."

The Parliament building, tall, dark brown, with Gothic spires at the sides and a dome in the middle, stared down gloomily at the men. It seemed to be receding from them, sinking into the Danube. It looked like a huge mediaeval cathedral.

Wounded men dropped without a sound. Advancing in short rushes, the mortar platoon linked up with Barsov's party.

"You, here, Zhenya?" Chernysh heard a voice at the side.

Turning round, he saw young Barsov himself, a tommy gun in his hand and the flush of the fighting upon him. He didn't look at Chernysh, but took aim from behind a round stone post, fired a burst, and jumped over the railing, making for the parapet by the water. The Party organizer of No. 4 Company, a tall, middle-aged sergeant whom Chernysh knew, stood up erect,

shouted "Hurrah" and slumped down, wounded, on the thawing snow. But the "Hurrah" did not die, it swelled and rolled along the bank, caught up by a multitude of voices and very likely carrying right across the wide Danube.

The Germans, firing back savagely, were retreating behind the massive granite pillars that supported the great Parliament building on its western side, the side giving on the river.

Khayetsky was squirming along the wall to one of these pillars. Behind the pillar, a German tommy gunner was standing, and he went right on firing, unaware of Khoma.

You have not eyes enough, enemy soldier! You do not know that the long weeks of war in the labyrinths of Pest have been a big school for fighting man Khayetsky! The hundred and seventy blocks won in bitter fighting by Chumachenko's battalion have not been wasted upon Khayetsky. He is accustomed by now to underground catacombs, to barricades in the streets, to thinking of windows as "embrasures" and pillars as "cover." He knows where he must be careful and where he can pounce.

As he can here.

Looking out from behind the pillar was the barrel of a black tommy gun. Khayetsky jumped at it from the side, seized the hot barrel in both hands and jerked it towards him. With it came the German. A great brute of a fellow, taller than Khoma, with black ear-laps and eyes that roamed wildly. He clung to the tommy gun as if he were welded to it. Puffing and blowing, they wrestled for the weapon, each trying to outwit the other and pitch him over into the river. But the German sidled away from the bank, so Khoma sidled away too. At last he found an opportunity and twisted the gun round with all his might. The German's elbow-joints gave a creak.

A passing soldier whom Khoma didn't know banged the German on the pate with his rifle-butt. The German clutched at his head, swayed, but managed not to fall. He stared in horror at the high bank faced with stone. The Danube was dark below, like a precipice.

"Don't wriggle, damn you!" Khayetsky shouted, panting, and gave him a whack with his own tommy gun. "I'll help you keep steady!"

The next moment, the German was at the edge. With a kick in the rear, Khoma sent him flying into the water.

The whole thing had lasted a few seconds.

The river bank was one seething vortex. A dense stinking smoke hung over the water. All along the embankment, the assault parties were finishing the job with grenades and hand-to-hand fighting.

By this time, columns of prisoners were already moving down the streets near the Parliament. The prisoners themselves quickened the pace, to get beyond range of their artillery, which pounded Pest ceaselessly from the Buda heights.

A column of Hungarians—a colonel at the head of them—hurried past with a white flag made out of a counterpane.

"Where do we go to surrender?" the colonel asked.

Oryol and Chernigov lads showed him where, without any maps.

The Germans shuffling in the columns stared down at the ground, looked at no one. Like robbers in some picturesque tale, they were wearing the most irregular outfits. Only a few were still in their uniforms, the rest wore civilian overcoats, mackintoshes, hats, many had mufflers knotted round their necks. A queer transformation had taken place in this army: the moment it was without arms, it began to look like a column of convicts. As if they were being marched from prison to work, or maybe to the bathhouse. They had not the manhood, the

moral courage, to meet the look of our men, who stood on the pavements, still hot, flushed, elated with the fighting. Though it wasn't really cold, the prisoners' noses were dripping.

"Might at least wipe their Aryan noses!" the soldiers yelled.

A party of some hundred and fifty prisoners was being marched along by Kazakov. The sergeant was in high feather.

"A pedigree herd!" he shouted. "Even two colonels in it. That's one there, with his nose hanging down.... I shouldn't wonder if Major Vorontsov lets us get up on our horses today."

"What about Buda?"

"It will be the same there too!"

The columns trudged and trudged, there seemed no end to them. A spindle-shanked middle-aged soldier in tightly rolled puttees remarked:

"Used to happen in '41—it did use to happen, brothers—that one tommy gunner of theirs would be marching ten of our fellows along. Now one of ours comes marching a hundred of them."

"That's history, old man, history," a bass broke in. "The turning wheel of history.... Got any tobacco?"

"No. Only cigars!... Havanas."

"Mucky stuff. What wouldn't I give for some of our Kremenchug *makhorka*!"

XXIV

Bursting into the Parliament building after the fighting on the embankment, the mortarmen ran into Ferenc.

"You here already, Ferenc?" Vasya Bagirov exclaimed. "You'll get killed! They're still firing, you know...."

"I shall not get killed now," the artist replied solemnly, taking off his hat. "Not now any more."

He went up to Chernysh and took his hand.

"Comrade Lieutenant . . . of the Guards," he said, his accent more pronounced than usual. "I want to thank you all . . . all of Russia . . . for everything! . . ."

He made to raise the hand to his lips. Chernysh snatched it away.

"Don't, Ferenc. We don't do that, you know."

They raced up the white marble staircase. Ferenc hurried after the men, the sides of his raincoat flapping. He pointed to the one-piece marble columns that flanked the sides.

"Our masterpiece!"

Masterpiece! Chernysh winced at the word. It conjured up the picture of Sasha Sivertsev, as Ferenc had drawn him in his album. He had said the same thing then.

"These come from Sweden . . . these from Ferrara . . . these from Germany . . . monoliths!"

Khoma looked about him sharply. He couldn't get over the feeling that there was an enemy Tommy gunner lurking in the gloom behind every column.

"The reception hall . . . mahogany, bronze, rose marble . . . a masterpiece!"

Soldiers from another regiment—animated, jubilant—were coming down the stairs in twos and threes with light machine guns on their shoulders. Grinning and wisecracking, they drove some disarmed Germans before them.

"Where are you heading for, brother Slavs?" they asked.

"Want to see the ministers!"

"You won't find them here."

"They're still sitting in the sewers!"

"Ha-ha-ha!"

Like echoing mountainsides, the halls gave back the laughing voices.

The stained-glass windows filled the hall, the lobbies, the corridors with a soft parti-coloured twilight, like a

rainbow. As if these white stairs led up to a misty, fantastic world.

"The Chamber of Deputies," Ferenc announced proudly, running up to the mortarmen from different sides.

Higher up, there was more light—it was like climbing a tall mountain. Through a hole in the dome, the sky shone bright.

The Chamber of Deputies. . . . A sombre, stately hall with tiers of seats. In front of each seat, a little desk with a tablet. On the tablet, the deputy's name. Where were they now, these deputies who had sold their people to the fascists? In Switzerland, or in Bavaria, or in the Isle of Capri?

In the pit of the hall, as on a circus arena, stood a round table covered with green baize. Scattered about it on the floor lay some heavy old leather-bound volumes. Near the table stood the red plush chairs of the ministers.

"The speaker's tribune. . . . The diplomatic boxes. . . . The press gallery. . . ."

Ferenc throbbed with pride and emotion.

Khayetsky sank down wearily onto one of the chairs, staring at the ornate walls. Only now did he realize how his feet were aching.

"Khoma! Khoma!" Ferenc said, perturbed. "That's a minister's chair."

"A minister's, is it?" Khoma bent over and looked under him. "Well, what about it? Think it will collapse? No, it doesn't seem any worse than the rest. Nice and soft, just right for me. . . . You know yourself, Ferenc, that I've been shell-shocked. . . ."

Khoma wiped his face on his sleeve. The soldiers scattered between the rows of seats, poked about to make sure that some confounded Fritz wasn't hiding somewhere.

Ferenc gathered up the heavy folios from the floor, wiped them, stacked them reverently on the table.

"What are those books?"

"Laws, Khoma . . . our old laws."

"Oh, that's the laws that sang like a fiddle." Breaking into a sudden falsetto, Khoma imitated the sound of a fiddle: "'A wedding's coming, we'll eat and drink, a wedding's coming, we'll eat and drink. . . .' Right? And our bass says in reply"—now Khoma switched to a slow bass—" 'We shall see, we shall see. . . .' Well, we have seen. Isn't that so, Ferenc? . . . Only tell me, why are your laws all trampled and dusty?"

"I'll dust them, Khoma."

"Dust them, dust them good, Ferenc," Khoma enjoined, "and give them a shake-up too. Must be a lot of cobwebs on them by now. The good ones leave, and the bad ones shove in the stove. Put in new ones instead. A new kind, so that there'll be no more wars. Hear that, Ferenc?"

"But that's in the competence of the ministers. Khoma!"

"What did you say?"

"Well . . . that's our ministers. . . ."

"Ministers . . . hey, you ministers!" Khoma addressed the empty chairs, as if the ministers were in fact sitting there. "Come over here, I've got to talk to you. Got to see to it that things are done right. . . . Here we've bundled the fascists into the Danube. The chairs are vacant. Go ahead, sit in them. . . . But know that Khoma won't agree to have you take a fascist line again and swing it round to war. D'you think it's for nothing that I've crisscrossed the whole of Hungary with my trenches, all the way to the Danube? Is it for nothing that Oleksa and Shtefan and Prokop haven't come back to our Vulyga? Oh, no. . . . I'm going to keep an eye on you now. If you don't choose to live in peace and fellowship, you'll have a bitter brew to swallow, like the Fritzes are swallowing now! Don't grin, Ferenc, don't show me your teeth. My own are still good

enough to bite through a door-nail. Hands strong enough, too. And I've got two lads growing up at home, sturdy as young oaks. And I write and tell them to look across from our Vulyga to the Danube, and beyond the Danube, and over the whole wide world."

Chernysh was standing upstairs, in the Senate chamber, folded in soft gloom. He took in the sumptuous mural decorations, his eyes sliding carelessly over them, and thought about the comrades whom they had lost on the way, who had headed for this place and had not reached it. And all of them—Private Gai and Yuri Bryansky, Sasha Sivertsev and Shura Yasnogorskaya—all who had left the ranks forever or for a time—seemed to have mounted those white steps with him, and entered that hall. He saw their faces clearly, heard their voices and spoke to them himself.

"No one must forget you, neither fickle politicians nor wily diplomats; for you marched in the van of humanity, and without your sacrifice, there would have been nothing...."

He sobbed without tears, shouted without words.

"Mankind will snatch you up, like a song, and carry you aloft; for you were its first springtime song!..."

The great routes of armies stretched before Chernysh's eyes. From here, from this vantage point of a vanquished alien city, he saw countless thousands of grey fox holes scattered over the fields of Europe, heard the ringing of soldiers' hobnails on mined asphalt and the groan of some forgotten wounded man, high up in mountains that reared their summits in the clouds. Life had ceased to be the rosy riddle of youth, it was opening before him in the simplicity of greatness. He saw its purpose more clearly now than ever before. And if he were to fall, like Yuri Bryansky, in the plains beyond the Danube or the mountains of Slovakia, he would still thank destiny in his last flicker

of consciousness because it had not led him in zigzags, but had set him in the ranks of this great army, on a road that ran straight and unswerving.

Bagirov broke into his thoughts, arriving with the information that the battalion was mustering.

On their way down, they heard Khayetsky's voice and looked in at the Lower Chamber. Sitting in the pit of the hall with his legs crossed and his tommy gun in his lap, Khoma was holding forth. Around him, soldiers were in stitches with laughter. Some were Samiyev's men, some from other units.

"Pack up!" Bagirov said. "Mortar company, get moving!"

Khoma catapulted out of his seat.

"Best of luck, Khoma!" Ferenc pumped his hand.

"Best of luck, Ferenc! . . . And don't cough!"

"Everything will be hunky-dory, Khoma. Depend on us. And thank you for all the food. . . . Thank you for everything."

The soldiers clumped up the wooden steps between the deputies' seats.

Guns were firing from Buda.

One shell popped through the dome and burst down below, in the reception hall. Fragments of statues went flying. Clouds of white chalk rose from the walls, and the men dashed out of the building covered with it. Their weapons were white. And each man darting out was like a white falcon.

XXV

In the evening, the regiment got ready to march.

The troops mustered in a dark block of houses. Samiyev got the battalion commanders together and was posting them on the formation of the column.

Field kitchens rumbled across the yard, dropping embers and emitting appetizing smells. The men rushed with their billycans to get their supper.

Bagirov had got some carts from the transport company and was packing up the equipment and supplies. Everything pointed to the march being a long one. Ivan Antonich personally supervised the way his men wound their footrags and put on their boots, to make sure they didn't get sore feet on the way.

The Headquarters scouts were prancing about on black horses.

There were all kinds of rumours among the troops as to where they were headed for.

"Somebody said we were going to the Turkish frontier...."

"And I heard it was the Far East."

"That's all a lot of crap! We're pushing North, to cross the Danube."

"What's the use of guessing? We'll go wherever we're told to."

In a huge empty garage, the men had made fires. They were eating, and drying and changing their footrags. Steam rose from their padded trousers.

Ivan Antonich walked up to the fire where the mortarmen were squatting. The wave of warm air was a comfort.

Sitting among the men were Chernysh and Major Vorontsov. Sipping tea from their soot-blackened billycans, the group were engaged in a leisurely discussion; they must have been at it quite a time.

"... You know what Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin said about that?" the major was saying. "You'll be coming home different men, he says, men with world renown, men who know they are making world history."

"Hear that, Roman?" Khoma nudged his neighbour. "A maker of world history!"

"And they said we were a lower race...."

"So we are," Khoma said.

"What?" Denis turned upon him.

"A lower race, I say. 'Cause we're going to stay down below, and they'll wind up on the gallows. That's higher up, isn't it?"

There was a roar of laughter. Makoveichik toyed with a fancy cigarette-case.

"Go on, show the major your souvenir!" the others urged.

Makoveichik showed it. The cigarette-case was a clever gadget—it gave a snap and rolled a cigarette.

"Isn't it marvellous?" said one of the infantrymen, a mere youngster, like Makoveichik himself. His eyes shone. "All you have to do is put in the paper!"

"Marvellous!" The major put on a show of admiration. "Let's see it again!"

Makoveichik snapped again with artless delight.

"Will you take it home?" they asked.

"I wouldn't take back a miserable contraption like that," said Khoma. "Haven't I got any hands, or what, that I can't roll a cigarette for myself? And in general, all that fancy stuff is just to throw dust in your eyes. It works once or twice, and then it gets jiggered up. Now a motorbike would be something to take home!"

"Or a watch," the infantry lad followed up.

"They're simply lousy with watches around here."

"All 'Roskops,' "* Denis retorted, without shifting his eyes from the divisional newspaper in his hands. "Junk!"

"No end of silks here too!" the major put in casually.

"Artificial," Khoma objected. "Fall to pieces soon as you put them in water. D'you think we're blind? We can see everything!"

* A cheap make of watch.

"They've got all kinds of things, this, that and the other," the major said thoughtfully, and his eye came to rest on the paper in Denis' hands. On the front page, next to the heading, was a picture of the Order of Lenin which the division had been awarded. "But you tell me, Comrades," Vorontsov handed his empty billycan to the orderly, "you tell me this, where, in what country, was Leninism born?"

"Leninism?" Makoveichik repeated, bewildered by the unexpected question.

"Yes, Leninism, the teaching that has lit up humanity's road like the sun?"

"In ours."

"And who of them," the major raised his voice gradually, "who of them has a state that held out, like a cliff, in this storm?"

"None of them."

"And who of them has men that could have endured without breaking all that you and I have endured?"

The men sat thinking. Even in their silence there was a bond of unity. You could see that they weren't each thinking about private concerns of his own, but about their joint concern, about what they all had in common. It was a moment of the deep intimacy that is felt so often around a campfire among men who have come a long and hard way together and whom fighting has made kin. Joys and sorrows, memories and expectations had long become their common possession, all shared by one big family, as it were.

Chernysh drew from his pocket a letter folded into a little triangle, and opened it, bending closer to the fire. "Keeps reading it over, the lieutenant does," Khayetsky thought, watching him.

It was the first letter from Shura. Chernysh had just received it today.

"Hullo, Zhenya," she wrote. "I'm in the base hospital,

the same where I used to work myself and where I met Shovkun. Sasha Sivertsev is here too, we meet often and talk about the regiment. Our regiment! How much the word means to us—of longing, and pain, and something dear beyond expression! Where are you all now, Zhenya? In Budapest, at Esztergom, or at Kómarom? Sasha and I wonder about it every day and can never guess: wherever the fighting is heaviest, we feel you people must be. Over here, from a distance, we see everything with new eyes. Every step our infantryman takes seems an event that deserves to be chronicled. Zhenya, I'm so happy!... Yes, I mean happy. Don't be surprised that after all that's happened I can still talk of happiness. Don't think I've forgotten anything or that the wounds have healed and aren't bleeding any more. No, Zhenya.... That golden Transylvanian hill burns bright and unfading... and only the greatness of what he died for, and what I'm prepared to die for too, gives me strength and happiness even in the darkest moments. For is happiness only laughter and pleasure and being loved? Only very shallow people can think that, people who have never been fighters and haven't had a regiment and battle-standard of their own. People with such petty 'happiness' only deserve to be pitied. You know that better than I do, Zhenya. And you know, too, how sick I am of this hospital cot, of all these treatments and medicines. I want so badly to be rid of them and be back again with you all, marching in step with the rest...."

An order sounded outside:

"All officers to the battalion commander!"

Chernysh got up, putting away the letter. Vorontsov wasn't there any more. The men doused the fire and trooped out into the yard. Brief orders rang in the darkness, the companies formed up. It was snowing. Across the Danube, the hills showed flaming through the veil of whirling snow. They lit up the concrete piers of the tall

Danube bridges. Blasted girders hung down into the red water, as if they were drinking it avidly and could not have enough.

"Standard-bearers to the head of the column!" came the C.O.'s command.

The troops set out.

They would march at first through the dark chasms of the gutted city. Then come out in the Danube fields, drifted over with snow. Would march all night, hearing the cannonade to left and right. March right into it, unfaltering, gripping their trusty weapons.

At their head was the standard-bearers' platoon, carrying the regimental colours in a stiff canvas case, with a golden tip at the end of the pole.

As they went, the officers would glance at the compasses, luminous in the dark on their wrists.

They would march, march, march....

And all the way, the golden tip would sway and gleam over their heads.

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